

*Thank You Lord  
For Letting Me Be  
An Instrument of  
Your Love*

Reflections on Divine Love  
Breaking Through

*An Anthology*

# Preview Edition

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# *Introduction*

When Saint Francis prayed for God to make him an instrument of His Peace, it seems clear he also was including His Love. And he, like all of us, no matter how loving our intentions may be, have found ourselves speaking and doing in ways quite the opposite. But then there are those blessed moments when, accepting our imperfections and weaknesses with a humble heart, we pray for Him to say and do through us, to make us an instrument of *His* Love.

On those precious occasions when this prayer is answered and we are able to consciously witness Him manifesting miraculous Love through us — what inexplicable Joy! With our hard-earned humility, we *know* what has happened was His Grace breaking through our normal barriers of self-limitation, for we directly *experience* a degree of perfection in what is happening that we know is way beyond what we can do alone.

*How did that Perfection of Divine Love “break-through” me-limitations? Why now? Why me? And what can I do to increase openness to it happening again?* These and others are questions the contributors to this book have grappled with and lovingly share with us here.

*May these gifts  
support and uplift you.*

## *Dedication*

*To that beautiful  
Perfect ONE  
Whose Love shines  
through us and fills us  
with longing to be  
Its Joyful, willing  
instruments*

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*Preface*

# *On Love*

*Kahlil Gibran*

*(For some of us, discovering Kahlil Gibran's book, The Prophet, was our introduction to a kind of poetry that touched our hearts in a way that nothing we had been exposed to in English class had. So perhaps his beautiful chapter On Love will open and inspire us for what follows.)*

When love beckons to you, follow him,  
Though his ways are hard and steep.  
And when his wings enfold you yield to him,  
Though the sword hidden among his  
pinions may wound you.  
And when he speaks to you believe in him,  
Though his voice may shatter your dreams  
as the north wind lays waste the garden.

For even as love crowns you so shall he crucify you.  
Even as he is for your growth, so is he for your  
pruning.

Even as he ascends to your height and caresses  
your tenderest branches that quiver in the sun,  
So shall he descend to your roots  
and shake them in their clinging to the earth.

Like sheaves of corn he gathers you unto himself.  
He threshes you to make you naked.  
He sifts you to free you from your husks.  
He grinds you to whiteness.  
He kneads you until you are pliant;  
And then he assigns you to his sacred fire,  
that you may become sacred bread  
for God's sacred feast.

All these things shall love do unto you  
that you may know the secrets of your heart,  
and in that knowledge become  
a fragment of Life's heart.

But if in your fear you would seek only  
love's peace and love's pleasure,  
Then it is better for you that you cover your  
nakedness  
and pass out of love's threshing-floor,  
Into the seasonless world where you  
shall laugh, but not all of your laughter,  
and weep, but not all of your tears.

Love gives naught but itself  
and takes naught but from itself.  
Love possesses not would it be possessed;  
For love is sufficient unto love.

When you love you should not say,  
“God is in my heart,” but rather,  
“I am in the heart of God.”  
And think not you can direct the course of love,  
for love, if it finds you worthy, directs your course.

Love has no other desire but to fulfill itself.  
But if you love and must needs have desires,  
let these be your desires:  
To melt and be like a running brook  
that sings its melody to the night.  
To know the pain of too much tenderness.  
To be wounded by your own understanding of love;  
And to bleed willingly and joyfully.  
To wake at dawn with a winged heart  
and give thanks for another day of loving;  
To rest at the noon hour and meditate love's ecstasy;  
To return home at eventide with gratitude;  
And then to sleep with a prayer for the beloved  
in your heart and a song of praise upon your lips.



## *Chapter One*

# *What is Love?*

*...Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.*

*Matt. 22, 37-9*

Why are these two great commandments of Christianity both focused on Love? What if Love is the actual Reality? What if it's true that God and Love are one? What if it's true that everything we perceive is an expression of that Love?

A helpful metaphor is that of watching a movie in a movie theater. When we do this, we voluntarily suspend awareness of everything around us and give ourselves—identify with—the reality on the screen. We forget that behind the movie, way back in the projection booth, there is a projector containing pure white light. And it is exactly the same pure white light that has been the source of every movie we have ever experienced!

The goal of all spiritual paths, though described variously, is to shift our attention from the seemingness of what we experience on the screen of our minds to the Reality of the pure white light which is its Source. Religions call that white light God. And perhaps it is with such an awareness that this famous bible passage comes to us through all the Abrahamic religions:

*“Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct thy paths.”*

*Proverbs 3, 5-6*

Following this metaphor further, what is it that changes the original pure white light into the movie which we identify with on the screen? In the old days it was movie film, a long ribbon of filters that let certain frequencies of light in certain places pass through and blocked others. A screen which, without these filters would be pure white light, is divided into millions of different places where that light is limited in intensity and in which colors and shapes dance with each other.

This metaphor is useful for understanding the term ego, the sense of who I am. “Me” may be understood and experienced as our unique collection of experiences, relationships, desires, attachments, ideas, and beliefs. It is fundamentally, like movie film, a way of limiting infinite consciousness into something finite, something we experience and conceive of as “me.”

Now consider for a moment that pure Divine Light from which all movies—all selves—are projected. It can be considered either full or empty. It is full in the sense that it contains the *potential* for every possible movie; it is the stuff which every “me” limits to create its perceptions and construct its own reality.

But in another sense, It is empty. Its nature is freedom from any limitations—It is infinite. As a ray of this Light, we have a choice: we can allow Divine Love to create a movie *through us* which expresses Its will perfectly. But unfortunately most of us have developed the habit of using our ego to take this Divine Movie, this unique ray of Light which is the Divine expressing Itself as an individual, and

have limited it *much* further through our desires, attachments, and identity.

It is the joy of *unlimiting* this pure Divine emanation in us and allowing that Divine Love to play through us as It will that expresses itself in the title of this book.



Just as a sculptor sharpens their tools before beginning to manifest the vision within longing to be expressed in wood, so too it is useful in writing to sharpen the meanings of some of our words which have become dull and vague over years of abuse and misuse. For this, the spiritual traditions of India can offer some support

God, The Source, The Infinite is understood to be beyond all concepts and definitions. However, in order to make it more real for our limited minds, there are five attributes of Divinity which are understood to be the nearest possible description of the One. These are Love, Knowledge, Joy, Peace and Freedom. Like different facets of a diamond, to the degree we are open to any of these, to that degree we experience all of them. And to the degree we block or limit the expression of any of these, all of them are also limited in us.

There are clear distinctions between these Divine attributes and their limited human shadows. Peace is understood in the sense of *the Peace that passeth all understanding*. It is not simply a temporary reduction of stress relative to the chronic tension that pervades our lives. Rather, it is the core stillness, the realm beyond all pairs of opposites. Through this Peace, all manner of life can express itself, yet the essential Peace of the Self is never disturbed.

Likewise, Joy is like the sun, always shining, sometimes felt in Its fullness, sometimes diffused by clouds, and in the night totally blocked. Yet Joy Itself never changes,

existing beyond the always changing waves of happiness and unhappiness, pleasure and suffering, having and not-having.

Freedom is understood to be an essential aspect of Reality, the unlimited ability of Divine Will to manifest whatever it wishes; omnipotence is necessarily a part of this perfect Freedom. And it is understood that every soul, every spark of the Divine manifesting as a human being, also contains a bit of this free will, this ability to manifest what we wish. However, within creation, the law of karma is at work: we are free to do whatever we can, but not to avoid the *consequences* of how we think, speak, and act. And when we do not live in harmony with Dharma, the underlying law or principle that makes possible and sustains creation, then suffering ensues. And this suffering, in addition to blocking the omnipresent Joy, also limits our freedom, leaving many of us feeling a slave to our personality and alienated from our Divine essence.

So it is useful to distinguish between the freedom to play in harmony with dharma versus the license to do whatever “I” desires in the moment. Likewise, it is important to “catch” the difference between purely perceiving divine will versus being deceived by the delusions projected by ego, between the Joy of experiencing divine will through me versus the temporary pleasure of doing our own will, between gratifying desire versus surrendering self-will to divine will.

It is also useful to discriminate between information—all we have learned, all we believe we “know”—versus Divine Knowing which is omniscience. Most of us have had moments when we simply “know” something, beyond any past experience or reason, a “gut feeling” that is usually wiser than what our rational minds would have us do. These may be glimpses into genuine Knowing, a momentary transcending of the limitations of mind and openness to the perfect Knowing within.

And finally we come to Love, the facet of the Jewel of Divinity that we are focusing upon in this book. In the Western religious traditions, a distinction is made between agape and eros. One dictionary defines agape as *the kind of love and action that shows empathy, extends the desire for good of the beloved, wants the best, extends help or demonstrates good intentions, and is intended for everyone.* *Agape love is sacrificial.* It is a force in the Universe that pushes us towards a greater level of co-operation and seeks to unite and make whole. Perhaps, then, we might use this as a “best understanding” of Divine Love as It expresses through us humans. And agape, being an aspect of unchanging Divinity, doesn’t change; it is not a relative emotion, but a radiance, like the Light in a movie projector (agape) versus the ever-changing movies (eros).

Eros isn’t a great opposite of agape, since it is commonly used with a sexual connotation. But for comparison’s sake, we might think of eros as transactional, as the warm feelings we have giving and receiving. It is a function of embodiment and includes the natural love between parent and child, siblings, and friends. But it is an aspect of “me,” an emotion “I” feels which can change or vanish as emotions fluctuate. So we can think of Divine Love as pure unchanging radiance and our emotional love as fluctuating vibrations.

Perhaps one of the best known and most beautiful descriptions of agape love was written by St. Paul in 1-Corinthians 13: “...*Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails....For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when completeness comes, what*

*is in part disappears....For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.*

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

So what keeps us from living this agape love fully? That which imposes limits on Divinity shining through us is called ego, “me,” something that limits that pure love just as movie film in a movie projector limits the pure white light and makes it into something with which we identify and have experiences. We all know how engrossing experiencing a movie can be, but at some point, we’ve had enough and want something more real, something beyond temporary gratification, something that is eternally satisfying. And that means letting go of our ego limitations.

*Saranagati* is a Sanskrit word that is generally translated as *surrender*; but a better meaning is, *taking refuge onto*, seeking a place of protection, a shelter. In other words, resigning onto the Divine, surrendering ego so that we can know the joy of Divine Love working through us.

*anonymous*

## *Chapter Two*

# ***I Am an Egocoholic***

At some point we realize that whatever I identify with, think of as “me,” limits Divine Love from expressing Itself fully in us. If we are fortunate, we experience a longing to be free of “me” limitations and be filled with that Infinite Love, witnessing Its Perfection playing through us as we become a more and more purified instrument.

As this longing becomes stronger, more persistent and insistent, it becomes clear that some of our behavior is that of an addict, one whose cravings can overwhelm everything else that is important. Addiction is a loss of freedom to choose what is appropriate from a variety of different levels of response within ourself—being stuck choosing what we are addicted to

A dear friend of mine discriminated between *ritual* and *routine*; they are meanings I've never forgotten, even though they're not a commonly used this way. Ritual in my mind is epitomized by the Japanese Tea Ceremony, a highly conscious set of movements done so as to never slip into unconscious routine. And perhaps that's what makes the ceremony so beautiful and enduring, that radiance of consciousness and love for what one is doing.

Routine, on the other hand, is simply habit. I do what I do as I did it before, not needing to think or be aware.

Everything just happens automatically, unconsciously, and I rarely even consider that I have voluntarily entered into a state of slavery, have surrendered my freedom for the temporary comfort of unconsciousness. In theory I can do differently, but choice made the same over and over for a long time becomes a deep rooted habit; it is no longer a choice, it's an addiction.

So let's consider what is perhaps the core addiction in each of our lives: being ego-centric. By this I don't mean being chronically selfish or totally self-centered. Rather, ego-centric means experiencing through the lens of "me." The totality of all our experiences, thoughts, words, deeds make up a filter through which we experience and try to make sense of life. And on our own, those of us who have tried to "kick" this ego-centric addiction and live in expanded consciousness know how impossible it usually feels!

I have known people who had to deal with their addiction to alcohol, and one of them taught me about the 12-step program. As I understood it more deeply, I became intrigued with applying these 12 steps to my addiction to being ego-centric, to being attached to "me" reality no matter how much suffering it caused. Below is the fruit of those considerations, with an introduction of three focusing quotes:

"...you must shift to knowing that you and the divine energy are one and the same, and that it is your ego that is conniving to keep you from knowing the power of this in your own life."

*Wayne Dyer*

"...this is a time to welcome and appreciate breakdown as a sign that some sort of existential change is on the way. It's a time to shift our focus and direct our attention to signs of breakthrough. More than anything else, the intensity of these

times challenges us to deepen our own orientation to the Real —and to our intelligent appreciation of future evolutionary possibilities that are being worked out in our lives and through our lives.

*Steve Nation from kosmosjournal.org*

“...everything I need to be whole, to be free, is available within, if I am willing to let go. Let go of what? My illusion of a separate self, the illusion at the heart of every crisis we face in the world today. It’s the illusion that my needs, my grievances, my opinions, my projects, my convenience, my life...is of paramount importance. It’s the illusion that feeds every system of oppression. By letting go of this illusion, that I am separate from nature, separate from the person reading these words, separate from the source of life itself, I set foot on a path of liberation for myself and all “others.”

But how do we let go? Ironically, it has something to do with refraining, in the way we think of fasting as refraining from the consumption of food.... Fasting is taming the impulse to feed the ego, to refrain from self-serving habits of consumption and behavior that are toxic to my mind/body and thus, the collective mind/body.

And just like fasting from food frees up space in our bodies, fasting from ‘ego-food’ frees up space in our consciousness to contemplate nature, feel humility, and serve others. This is the meaning of “the meek shall inherit the Earth.” To be meek does not mean ‘weak’—it’s a willingness to be bridled or ‘fit to purpose’ by the very hand of Creation.

Letting go is letting in, opening our hearts to the possibility of sacred togetherness. And isn’t that what we hunger for?

*From: <https://www.kosmosjournal.org/newsletter/2024-01-15/>*

### ***Addiction to “Me”***

As a spiritual seeker, my inner work has made it painfully clear how addicted I am to “me,” meaning my personality. I have known for decades that my true essence—my spirit or soul—transcends this limited body/mind that I seem to be so fond of. Still, when I’m honest, I notice that my attachment to *who I think I am* is very similar to an alcoholic’s attachment to drinking.

I’m not saying that ego itself is the problem—just excessive *identification* with it. We all need a certain amount of healthy ego in order to live on this planet. But in our culture, worshiping of individual egos has become elevated almost to the level of religion. Questions like “What’s in it for me?” and values like “Being number one is everything” or “Win at all costs” reflect this obsession with the importance of my individuality. We seem to collectively believe that it’s crucial for individuals (or a group with which I identify) to succeed, even if our doing so causes suffering for others. This belief is reflected in the ways we do business, in how we organize sporting activities, and in numerous aspects of what we collectively and unconsciously take for granted as ‘the way things are.’

We have to remember that the essence of ego can operate on both individual and collective levels. For instance, what passes for nationalism these days is nationalistic ego, an identification with country in a way that accentuates our *separateness* from people of different countries. Likewise with racial, ethnic, or religious collective egos.”

### ***Distorting Perception***

The problem of ego isn’t simply knowing who we are, either individually or as a group—it’s *distorting* this knowing in a way that focuses on what *separates* us rather than

acknowledging what we have in common and moving forward together. This is what they mean in recovery circles when they say that you're either going forward or going backward. So we try to keep going forward, questioning, trying to understand the way things really are at deeper and deeper levels.

### ***Ego's Myopia***

One can also contemplate about ego and the line between a healthy *sense* and expression of who I am versus an unhealthy obsession with 'me.' Excessive involvement with 'me' is a kind of myopia, a near-sightedness that leaves everyone and everything else in the world out of focus. In this state, I can't see clearly enough to avoid bumping into others and hurting them and myself. It's really a very contracted kind of consciousness, one that tends to see life through a lens of fear and distrust. So I end up moving through my days artificially ignorant, defended, and tense.

Then sometimes I get thinking about the values I *say* are so important: cooperation, caring for others, unselfishness. These sound great, but they're often in direct conflict with the interests of my myopic ego.

I've wondered how it would be to form a group and call it something like "*Egoholics Anonymous*." We could have meetings and share how our true, meaningful development has become arrested because of our addiction to the illusion of an all-important 'me.' Here's a possible re-wording of the original 12-steps:

***An Egocoholic Twelve-Step Program  
Working “Spiritual Sobriety”***

1. We admitted we were powerless over our ego cravings—that maintaining our spirit’s inherent clarity and balance in our lives had become unmanageable.

2. We came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.

“3. We made a decision to turn our will and lives over to the care of God as we understood him/her/it.

4. We made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves. (As used here, the word *moral* refers to being able to distinguish between right and wrong. This focuses on our values and how we handle conflict when we discover we hold opposing values inside.

5. We admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs (remembering that “God helps those who help themselves” and those who sincerely and appropriately seek help from others.).

“6. We were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character (humble our ego).

7. We humbly asked God to remove our shortcomings.

8. We made a list of all persons we had harmed and became willing to make amends to them all. (As that might not be possible in the realm of self-centeredness and egoistic myopia, we might soften this so that the focus is on inner transformation that changes our behavior *from this moment on*. The law of cause and effect will take care of bringing the results of my past self-centered behavior back to me—I just want to be able to accept my karma in whatever way it unfolds with awareness and thankfulness, and a continuing eagerness to learn from whatever happens.)

9. We made direct amends to such people wherever possible except when to do so would injure them or others.

10. We continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it."

11. We sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood him/her/it, praying only for knowledge of God's will for us and the power to carry it out.

12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we share this message with other receptive egoholics and practice these principles in all our affairs.

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As many of us have learned, another approach which also brings expansion of consciousness from its ego-centric bondage is a regular, sincere meditation practice. So to complement the above, consider this excerpt from Susan Salzberg's book, *A Heart As Wide as the World*:

“It is true that all beings want to be happy. We want to feel at home in our own lives. We want to feel a part of something greater than our limited sense of who we are. We need an internal feeling of abundance, to be able to give to others. We need the fulfilling knowledge of our connection to all that lives, in order to love others. But in our habit of reaching out to satisfy our needs, we miss where our deepest satisfaction lies. A Tibetan text puts it like this: *Beneath the pauper's house there are inexhaustible treasures, but the pauper never realizes this, and the treasures never say, 'I am here.'* Likewise, the treasure of our original nature, which is naturally pure, is trapped in ordinary mind, and beings suffer in poverty.

“All of those voices lead us away from knowing that we already have what we need. When we practice meditation,

we discover the treasure of our original nature. We learn to let go of that cacophony of voices shouting at us about our seeming poverty. We learn not to get caught in trying to reach out and grasp after things we never really needed to begin with.

“When we practice meditation, we see that we can put down the burdens we have carried for so long. The poet Rumi says: “How long will we fill our pockets like children with dirt and stones? Let the world go. Holding it, we never know ourselves, never are airborne.” When we practice meditation, we let go. We let go of our addictions to certain objects and experiences, let go of believing in those voices that call to us. We let go of our limited concepts of happiness and of who we are and what we need. Discovering the treasure of our original nature, we can be airborne. We can be free.”

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*Just as a recovering alcoholic is always at risk of backsliding, so too recovering egoholics such as this writer are always vulnerable to pride (desire for recognition) infesting its consciousness and interfering with being an instrument of Divine Love. Therefore, the author of this and the previous chapter chooses to remain anonymous.*

## *Chapter Three*

# **A Story of Beginnings: Memories of Magic and Wonder**

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*Introduction by Irina Tweedie  
from The Face Before I Was Born:  
A Spiritual Autobiography*

Every journey great or small begins with the first step, says a Chinese proverb. What leads the human being to make

this inner journey in order to realize the Truth? “Truth is God,” said Mahatma Gandhi. Sufis conceive God as “Ultimate Reality,” “in which everything is and nothing is outside it.”

Each person will find his or her individual way and attract the circumstances for the inner development, which is very personal, very lonely, and absolutely unique. There will be signposts along the way, but one must be ever alert to read the directions.

In each of us there is a strange and mysterious longing, a faint echo. We hear it and hear it not, and sometimes the whole life can pass without us knowing what this call is. I asked one of my teacher’s disciples to translate a Persian song, and it went like this:

*I am calling to you from afar  
Since aeons of time,  
Calling, calling, since always.  
“I can’t hear”—so you say  
“Who is calling and why?”*

Sometimes a very young child begins to ask questions about the meaning of life and the purpose of creation: “Who is God? How did the world come about? Why am I here?” Parents *be careful*. Don’t answer these questions glibly or facetiously. It may be, just maybe, the first signpost. The first step leading us much later to the great inner journey.

Llewellyn came to our group very young. I think he was nineteen. He arrived wounded by life. His wings were clipped. Had his life much meaning? I don’t think so. But he stayed and grew. He meditated. He worked upon himself. He watched, willing to surrender to his own Light. He persevered.

It is not easy to understand that the purpose of spiritual training is to help the human being to control, to diminish the ego. Our teacher, Bhai Sahib, said, “Two cannot live in one

heart. Make yourself empty; when your cup is empty something else can fill it.” But the taming of the ego is a painful process. It is a crucifixion. One does not lose anything. “You cannot become anything else but what you already are,” said Carl Jung. We just learn to control our lower self and it becomes our servant, not our master. The master is the Real Us, our soul, and the real wisdom *is* in the soul.

Llewellyn caught the meaning, the subtle essence of the spiritual training. He understood the pressing urge, that Something within the human heart, which drives the human being mercilessly on and on, no matter the sacrifice, sometimes with superhuman effort, at least to try to reach the ultimate Goal.

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## *A Story of Beginnings: Memories of Magic and Wonder*

As the seasons and the years pass I have watched with a deep sadness how shadows have fallen over our world, how it has grown in divisiveness, and more recently the miasma of fake news, the distortions of social media and conspiracy theories that have become a denser and distracting darkness. And while our ecological crisis has become more tangible, fires, floods, climate refugees, our civilization appears still addicted to the old story of economic growth, despite the simple truth that our present way of life is unsustainable. Watching our world burn—although we have been offered a growing awareness of oneness, of the interdependent nature of all of life—our governments have been drawn more into

isolation, people into tribalism, social and racial inequality and injustice growing.

Grieving for a beauty and wonder being lost, like the wildflowers vanishing from our meadows, for years now I have been haunted by ancient memories of an earlier time, before what we think of as “the Fall,” when the worlds of light and the powers of creation worked together in sacred relationship.<sup>1</sup> It was a simpler time, when humanity was still young and the Divine was a tangible presence in the air around, like the first sweetness of Spring. There was a knowing present then that has now become deeply hidden—a knowing of the sacred purpose of creation, of its beauty and wonder. And this knowing was coming alive, speaking to human beings in all the myriad voices of the world around, in the streams and storms, in the cries of the birds and the animals, in the first language of life.<sup>2</sup> It was the joy of life communing together, and we were a part of it all, part of its songs and dreams. This is what I remember.

So much was given at this time, when the soul of humanity and the soul of the world were bonded together, and the Earth showed her generosity. The land was pristine and its sacred nature known and praised. It was a time of beginning, the time of the “Original Instructions,” when the servants of light began their work of awakening the world. It was then that the sacred names of creation were first given to human beings, first to the shamans, healers and keepers of the sacred ways—the names of animals that evoked their power, the names of plants that revealed their healing properties, the names of rivers and mountains that ensured that the world was kept in harmony and balance—and through them humanity and the created world came into a new relationship and sang together. There was a purity of intention in this relationship between humanity and the Earth and all its myriad creatures; their partnership had a sacred purpose.

Together they would work to awaken the magic and light hidden within the physical world,<sup>3</sup> and that light would serve a higher purpose. This was the beginning of the covenant between humanity and creation—how the natural world was the first book of divine revelation.

Now our culture just holds this as a myth: Adam in the Garden of Eden, giving creation its names.<sup>4</sup> But for me it has always been more personal, like a song I vaguely remember, that carries the distant melody of another time. This memory is of an innocence before the Fall, but it is also a memory of a primal relationship with creation that is now demanding my attention. The Earth is calling, crying out, and as this memory returns to me I know that there is another way to be.

We cannot return to the innocence of this earlier time, but this bond between humanity and creation remains, hidden beneath all the debris of our culture, the inner and outer wasteland we have created. The mystery and power of the names remain, the primal magic woven between the world of light and the world of creation. And we can reconnect to this magic, this awakened relationship with the Earth and its interior worlds—it needs to be reclaimed. It needs to be remembered. The magic that belongs to the real wonder and mystery of creation needs to be reawakened, reconnected to its source in the light.

When I remember those earlier times of walking the Earth with the power of the names, there was such joy and love in this communion with creation. In my first experience in this life of “waking up,” when I was sixteen, I found myself again in the garden of creation, with the sunlight reflecting off the waters of the river near where I lived. There was even a small walled garden, full of flowers, where I would spend many of my free hours. It was an awakening into the Earth’s beauty and wonder, its fragrance and light,

and those first weeks of awakening still remain with me, like the memory of a first love. Years later, when I was given my first full experiences of oneness, it was also in nature, walking in the hills of Northern California, again in the sunlight, this time with the waters of the Pacific nearby.

This primal beauty of creation has been calling to me for many years, reminding me of a time when the world was younger and unspoiled, before the darkness and the troubles came. And now I need to return to this inner quality, this note that belongs to a deep love for the Earth. I need to live this link of love within my heart and soul and body, otherwise I will become stranded in the wasteland of our present increasingly toxic civilization.

This is the grief that haunts me, this passing even more poignant than loss of species, wildflower meadows we may never see, choruses of birds we may never hear. A grief that does not belong to our sanitized lives; it is vast, and it cries with the names of creation that have been forgotten, of rivers that once ran with magic, and memories older than the mind. I can never forget the wonder of the first dawn, of the awakening of the songs of existence, of the ways the worlds were woven together. I do not ask to remember, but neither can I dismiss these echoes of what has vanished, like the ancient forests clear-cut by centuries of “progress.”

In the time before time the history of our world was written, when life was sung into existence, and the angels were given their places to guard and protect—that was when the ley lines, the energy patterns in the Earth, were formed, when the levels of magic were created, when the inner and outer worlds began their great divide. And now, thousands of years have passed, so many tides have come and gone, and we stand in the time of the great forgetting, when humanity is furthest from the Source. Yes, there have been eras of darkness before, terrible destruction, but never such a

forgetting—we have forgotten that our world even has a history that was written before the beginning. This is why we stand at a door never before opened, at a crossroads never before reached. And now how many of us are left who remember, even as we all carry the scars of what has been forgotten, the great sorrow of generations?

I remember so well when it was not like this, when the colors sang in the air and magic was not a mystery but a way to live. Yes, there were years of hardship; there have always been times of hardship—that belongs to the ways of nature, the barren years as well as the bountiful, drought as well as rainfall. But this present time of forgetting is something else—not a chapter written in the book of life; it was noted only as a symbol of what might come to pass, a distant possibility. And yet this is now what is all around us, is the story of today.

What is it that I am witnessing, and what does it mean to be present at this time when the wells run dry and the air is toxic? And where are those who hold the balance of the worlds—the rainmaker sitting in his hut holding an inner equilibrium, the monk whose prayer beads and mantras keep the worlds in tune? What do we even know of these things when we cannot begin to grasp the significance of this moment—this time when even the existence of the inner worlds has been written out of the pages of the present civilization? Yes, a few essential things remain, like joy and love and the beauty of the stars or a sunset. But where are the dreams to guide us, the teachings to follow? Even spirituality has become just another commodity to be sold in the marketplace. Of its deeper truths there is hardly an echo.

Remembrance is both a blessing and a curse. It would be so much simpler just to live the moment as it is, knowing nothing of what has passed, to believe that what we

experience now is all that there is, like a child who knows only city streets and has never seen a meadow of spring flowers or a forest golden in the fall. Yet love and laughter remain; tears and heartache keep the soul alive. And in our hearts there is a seed of a future that returns to the beginning, to when the Source ran free and the names of creation sang in the wind.

### ***Back to the Beginning***

Could it be that back in the very beginning, before the division, before all the power plays, before even the misuse of magic that damaged so much, the relationship with the Divine was simple companionship, friendship, and love?<sup>5</sup> That we walked together, feet touching the ground, hearts singing the songs of creation? This was the time of naming, when “God taught Adam all the names, all of them,” and the world came alive through this pure magic. It was the time when rivers and trees sang their true nature, and everything was alive with divine presence. Maybe this is what is called the Garden of Eden, but then it was just the way things were.

More and more I am drawn back to this ancient, ancient memory, like a distant heartbeat. There is a sense that then the “friends of God” were friends with God, in this time before the Fall. There was this companionship with an Other who is not other, this friendship with the Divine and all of creation, as a simple song for which I now need the words. And there is a tenderness in this remembrance, which also feels like a reunion, a touching.

I often wonder at the meaning of the fact that when I first awoke in this life, that Summer when I was sixteen, I found myself back in the garden, with the light sparkling on the waters of the river and flowers alive in colors I had not known existed. Was this first experience both a foretaste and a

memory, a door opening into another world that had always been present, even if long forgotten?

That time was a prayer without words, a prayer because all of creation was alive with light, and I could sit and see it all, the water flowing around my hands as they dipped into the river. Was this how it was in the beginning, Earth as a prayer that came alive with its naming? As I have said, these ancient memories haunt me, memories of a time long, long before any religion, any need for a form of worship, because everything was this simple essence, this *light upon light*—the Divine, creation, and those of us who walked the Earth then, who knew what it meant to be truly alive. Was this the most ancient form of companionship—creation, Creator, and human beings, hand in hand? When it was all one sacred being coming alive, like the very first dawn?

And so now, after a spiritual journey that has taken me far beyond this outer world, into the formless and beyond, experiencing the substance that underlies everything that is and is not, what we may call Reality though it has no name—after knowing this Reality that is imprinted in every cell and every starfish, I return to this simple garden with something like the longing for a first love I never fully knew. Here is where it all began, in this life and I also sense many, many lifetimes ago. This is the “in the beginning” of the story, when the Divine did not have to be looked for, when there was a friendship that embraced everything. Then all was known in its true sense, and every blade of grass, every person, and every dream knew where it belonged. And here, in this world, where human and divine could meet and speak of the wonder of what *is*, spirit and matter did not know any division.

Later it all began to change, and that is the story of human evolution, the myth of the Fall, the beginnings of

religions as a way to reclaim part of what had been lost. It was also when earth magic began to change, ceasing to be a simple celebration—a calling out or singing of its own name—as, gradually, over millennia, the spirit withdrew into the inner worlds and heaven and earth grew separate. And much spiritual work also withdrew, away from the Earth and the patterns of creation, often to a place of retreat from the world. Something within creation also became hidden; a light became lost. And so an ancient friendship, a familiarity with the Divine, became covered over and distorted. We then had to find ways to return, devise practices to reconnect with the light within us. And the patterns of distortion that covered the Earth became stronger and stronger, until today we find our self in a world that has lost its way, that is spinning more and more out of balance.

Looking at this world today we see darkness more often than light. The primal song of creation, when the rivers and the mountains touched us with sacred music and meaning, has almost faded away. Instead there are the noise, the pollution, and the distortions of the wasteland we have created with our greed and desires. But this is not how it was in the “Original Instructions,” the ancient wisdom given to us in the early days.

And those instructions are still present, if we know how to look, how to remember. If we dare to return to this deeply human way to be with the Creator in Her creation, with our feet touching the ground, its magic can come alive again. Then in our praise and thanksgiving the worlds of light and the world of matter come together. We are both heaven and earth, born from stardust and soil. If we can only remember that, the bond of love between the two can once again come alive within our hearts. This is the prayer and the promise that have held me here in this world.

In this memory of how it was in the beginning, this story that belongs to the Earth, is also my own story. This is the thread I have been trying to follow, the thread woven through lifetimes and across oceans. And in this story more and more I am left with my simple human self. That is why I like to dig my potatoes from the ground, potatoes that I can bake for my dinner and have with melted butter and cheese. Somewhere deep inside I do not understand why it had to go so wrong, why we had to forget and abandon the old ways, the ways of respect and reverence for the Earth and the Divine, for all that is sacred, and why the magic within creation had to become hidden. And yet I am also a part of this culture that has forgotten—that was my childhood in middle-class England, until a Zen koan awoke me in the garden, with the flowers and their fragrance and the sunlight and the river.

And now, over half a century later, as an old man sits in his garden, watching the seasons, the colors in the garden changing as Summer turns to Autumn, I know that this primal awareness is like a seed of consciousness that we need for a new story, for a new way of being with the Earth. We need to return to the beginning, to the moment when magic was fully alive, when we were present in an animate Earth with all of our senses awake. This moment being outside of time is not so far away, waiting in a land we have dismissed and forgotten, that our rational selves have censored. How this seed will flower and flourish, how a new story will manifest, belongs to the mystery of evolution—how a new era can be born. But now it needs our attention, holding it in our hearts, our imagination and dreams. And we can nurture this seed with the grief for what we have lost.

*Footnotes*

1. In Sufism the world of light is called “the world of divine command” (*âlam al-amr*)—in contrast to “the world of creation” (*âlam al-khalq*) that we experience through the senses and the veils of the ego. In the world of divine command everything bows down before God. It is the domain of angels and other beings of light who only know to bow down before God, and can only enact God’s power and divine will. The world of light exists outside of time and space, and is accessed through the divine consciousness of the Self.
2. David Abram describes how “for the Inuit, as for numerous other peoples, humans and animals all originally spoke the same language.” He quotes an Inuit woman: “In the very earliest time, when peoples and animals lived on earth ... All spoke the same language. That was the time when words were like magic ... Those who are recognized as shamans or medicine persons most fully remember the primordial language, and are thus able to slip, at will, out of the purely human discourses in order to converse directly with the other powers.” From *The Spell of the Sensuous*, p. 87–88.
3. The light hidden within the created world is what the alchemists called the *lumen naturae*.
4. Genesis 2:19 “And out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them: and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof.”

5. The awakening of magic was part of the story of creation, when human consciousness first appeared. The natural magic of the Earth allowed us to experience the wonder and mystery of creation, how all of creation embodies a divine purpose. It can be seen, for example, in the cave paintings in southern France whose animals have a shamanic dimension. Tragically, this early magic began to be misused for the purpose of power, and this started the split between the worlds, the world of light and the physical world of creation, which is imaged in myth as the Fall, a loss of innocence. I sense a calling to return to this primal relationship, awakening this magic that is still present, although mostly hidden, within creation. The magical relationship between the worlds is a part of our heritage which we have mostly forgotten, although we still speak of a “magical moment” when the numinous energy of the inner comes into our outer world.

*This article was offered in 2021 on The Golden Sufi website. Many more of Llewellyn Vaughn-Lee's writings are available there also:  
[goldensufi.org/articles-and-interviews/](http://goldensufi.org/articles-and-interviews/)*



*Chapter Four*

# ***The More Beautiful World Our Hearts Know Is Possible***

*Charles Eisenstein*

*To the humble,  
whose invisible choices  
are healing the world.*

I was born in 1967 and was a very sensitive, intellectual, and dreamy child. I was always consumed by questions like, “Where did I come from?” “Why am I here?” and “Where am I going?” So of course, embedded as I was in a culture that sees science and reason as the source of truth, I tried to “figure out” the answers. I graduated from Yale University with a degree in Mathematics and Philosophy, but my development of reason and intellect brought me no closer to any truth I really cared about.

My quest had an emotional dimension as well. From an early age I sensed a wrongness in the world. Sitting in a classroom doing worksheets, part of me rebelled. “We are not supposed to be doing this! It isn’t supposed to be this way.” It

was a half-formed thought, embedded in a cloud of indignation and bewilderment. This perception, abetted by a growing awareness of ecological devastation and social injustice, prevented me from whole-heartedly embracing a normal career.

I didn't know what I was searching for, but I knew that none of the usual options life presents a Yale graduate attracted me. I went to Taiwan, learned Chinese, and soon found myself working as a translator. I spent most of my 20s there, educating myself broadly in Eastern spiritual traditions, though not at all rigorously—it was more through osmosis. I also read voraciously books on health, nutrition, globalization, spirituality, physics, and biology. Translation led to other business opportunities, and I became familiar with this dimension of the human experience. In Taiwan, I met my dear friend and ex-wife Patsy, with whom I have three children, all boys. In 2011 I remarried. My wife Stella and I have a son, my fourth. No one ever told me the procedure for making girls.

In my late 20s I entered what was to be a long period of intensifying crisis. It started when all my professional work became intolerable. It became excruciating to do work I didn't care about. Even though a million reasons told me why it was irresponsible, impractical, and foolish to quit, I eventually could not make myself do it anymore. An irrepressible feeling, “I am not here to be doing this!” took control of my life. So I entered a long period of searching. I did a yoga teacher training and discovered I definitely didn't want to teach yoga. I taught at Penn State University in a very marginal position—my official job title was “temporary employee type 2”—and reaffirmed my aversion to academia. And I stayed at home a lot taking care of our little boys.

What did I want to do? I was 36 and I still didn't know. Nor had I answered my lifelong question, “What is the origin

of the wrongness in the world?” Then one day both questions were answered at once, when the answer to my question crystallized inside me. As often happens with such questions, the answer was bigger than the question. It dissolved its premises and began reordering my world. I won’t tell you the answer-that-transcends-the-question now, but I spent the next four years pouring my heart and soul into a book, *The Ascent of Humanity*, that lays out what crystallized that day.

The “reordering of my world” wasn’t only intellectual. The next five years were much like a birthing process. The old world dissolved, and the contractions birthing me into the new took the form of a collapse of all that I once held onto. I went through divorce, bankruptcy, and exhaustion. I had to let go of a “life under control.” In my helplessness, I accepted help. I received the things I had given up on; for example, I met Stella and we had a baby, and there is so much love between all of us including my ex-wife Patsy. I have become rich, if not in money, certainly in connections to other people. Friends and strangers from all over the world write to tell me how my books have affected them; they sustain my faith and nourish my passion for the work I do.

This is the part of a bio where one implies that one has arrived at some exalted state of success, all mistakes safely in the past. Well, I’m not the guy who has got it all figured out. During the Covid pandemic, I had the opportunity once again to face an inner and outer unraveling. For months at a time I experienced a paralyzing despondency, borne of the calamity I saw overtaking society: the very Age of Separation I had been proclaiming, for years, to be nearing an end. Instead, it was reaching new extremes. At the same time, my critiques of the social response to the pandemic brought intense criticism, denunciation, and canceling, including from people whom I’d considered to be deep, trusted allies. Maybe, I thought, it is I who has gone mad, not the world. This is the question, the

doubt that paralyzed me. I tell the story of these years in my most recent book, *The Coronation*.

I know that my books and other work comes from a deep, inspired source, but that source is not me! It is more like I'm connecting to a field of knowledge, or to a story that wants to be told. This knowledge is as much my teacher as it is anyone else's. I'm kind of ordinary, compared to some of the amazing people I keep meeting. I'm just as much in the learning as anyone else, wandering as best I can toward "the more beautiful world my heart knows is possible," encumbered by the programming and the wounds of our civilization.

One more thing: because the source of my writing is not me, I prefer not to call what I do "my" work. If I weren't doing it, it would find someone else to do it. That's also why I prefer not to enclose what I create inside intellectual property walls. I welcome you to make the most of it, use it in the way that best serves what we all serve, and evolve it to the next level.

*Introduction edited from  
[charleseisenstein.org/about](http://charleseisenstein.org/about)*

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*Below are highlights  
edited from Charles Eisenstein's book  
***The More Beautiful World Our Hearts Know Is Possible****

I (like many others) felt a wrongness in the world, a wrongness that seeped through the cracks of my privileged, insulated childhood. I never fully accepted what I had been offered as normal. Life, I knew, was supposed to be more

joyful than this, more real, more meaningful, and the world was supposed to be more beautiful.

Our stories have failed us. Is it too much to ask, to live in a world where our human gifts go toward the benefit of all? Where our daily activities contribute to the healing of the biosphere and the well-being of other people? We need a *Story of the People*—a real one, that doesn’t feel like a fantasy—in which a more beautiful world is once again possible.

We live today at a moment of transition between worlds. The institutions that have borne us through the centuries have lost their vitality; only with increasing self-delusion can we pretend they are sustainable.

As I describe the world that could be, something inside me doubts and rejects, and underneath the doubt is a hurting thing. The breakdown of the old story is kind of a healing process that uncovers the old wounds hidden under its fabric and exposes them to the healing light of awareness. I am sure many people reading this have gone through such a time, when the cloaking illusions fell away: all the old justifications and rationalizations, all the old stories. We can say that the ecological crisis—like all our crises—is a spiritual crisis. By that I mean it goes all the way to the bottom, encompassing all aspects of our humanity.

This book is a guide from the old story, through the empty space between stories, and into a new story. It addresses the reader as a subject of this transition personally, and as an agent of transition—for other people, for our society, and for our planet.

It is a very precious—some might say sacred—time when we are in touch with the real. Each disaster lays bare the reality underneath our stories. The terror of a child, the grief of a mother, the honesty of not knowing why. In such moments our dormant humanity awakens as we come to each

other's aid, human to human, and learn who we are. That's what keeps happening every time there is a calamity, before the old beliefs, ideologies, and politics take over again. Now the calamities and contradictions are coming so fast that the story has not enough time to recover. Such is the birth process into a new story.

The fundamental precept of the new story is that we are inseparable from the universe, and our being partakes in the being of everyone and everything else. Why should we believe this? Let's start with the obvious: This interbeing is something we can feel. Why does it hurt when we hear of another person coming to harm? Why, when we read of mass die-offs of the coral reefs and see their bleached skeletons, do we feel like we've sustained a blow? It is because it is literally happening to our selves, our extended selves.

We are greater than what we have been told. We are not just a skin-encapsulated ego, a soul encased in flesh. We are each other and we are the world. The desire to serve something transcending the separate self and the pain we feel from the suffering of others are two sides of the same coin. Both bespeak our interbeingness.

The emerging *Story of the People* is the defining mythology of a new kind of civilization. I will call it the Story of Interbeing, the Age of Reunion, the ecological age, the world of the gift. It offers an entirely different set of answers to the defining questions of life.

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Our situation is much like that of a little girl who was taken by her mother to visit a chiropractor friend of mine. Her mother said, "I think something is wrong with my daughter. She is a very quiet little girl and always well behaved, but never once have I heard her laugh. In fact, she rarely even smiles." My friend examined her and discovered a spinal

misalignment that, she judged, would give the girl a terrific headache all the time. Fortunately, it was one of those misalignments that a chiropractor can correct easily and permanently. She made the adjustment—and the girl broke into a big laugh, the first her mother had ever heard. The omnipresent pain in her head, which she had come to accept as normal, was miraculously gone.

Many of you might doubt that we live in a “sea of pain.” I feel pretty good right now myself. But I also carry a memory of a far more profound state of well-being, connectedness, and intensity of awareness that felt, at the time, like my birthright. Which state is normal? Could it be that we are bravely making the best of things? How much of our dysfunctional, consumptive behavior is simply a futile attempt to run away from a pain that is in fact everywhere?

Upon each of us, the wound of Separation, the pain of the world, lands in a different way. We seek our medicine according to the configuration of that wound. To judge someone for doing that would be like to condemn a baby for crying. To condemn what we see as selfish, greedy, egoic, or evil behavior and to seek to suppress it by force without addressing the underlying wound is futile: the pain will always find another expression. Herein lies a key realization of interbeing. It says, “I would do as you do, if I were you.” We are one.

Remember this when you encounter a harsh, cynical critic (whether inside yourself or outside). If you remember that the cynicism comes from a wound, you might be able to respond in a way that addresses that wound. I can’t tell you in advance exactly how to respond. That wisdom comes directly from hearing with compassionate ears and being present to the hurting. Perhaps there is some act of forgiveness or generosity that calls to you that might allow healing.

The cynic mistakes his cynicism for realism. He wants us to discard the hopeful things that touch his wound, to settle for what is consistent with his lowered expectations. This, he says, is realistic. Ironically, it is in fact cynicism that is impractical. The naive person attempts what the cynic says is impossible, *and sometimes succeeds.*

Could it be that there is a lonely, timid part of you that wants to believe? Are you afraid of that part? I know I am. If I allow it to grow, if I allow it to guide my life, if I trust the new story, I open myself to the possibility of immense disappointment. It is an exquisitely vulnerable position to believe, to trust in purpose, in guidance, and that I will be okay.

The state of interbeing *is* a vulnerable state. It is the vulnerability of the naive altruist, of the trusting lover, of the unguarded sharer. To enter it, one must leave behind the seeming shelter of a control-based life, protected by walls of cynicism, judgment, and blame. However, the same interbeingness that makes us so immensely vulnerable also makes us immensely powerful. Remember this!

The vulnerability and the power go hand in hand, because only by relaxing the guard of the separate self can we tap into power beyond its ken. Only then can we accomplish things that are, to the separate self, impossible. Put another way, *we become capable of things that we don't know how to "make" happen.*

This book is a call to surrender control-based thinking, so that we can accomplish things far exceeding the capacity of our force. It is an invitation into a radically different understanding of cause and effect, and therefore a radically different conception of what is practical. Our choices often seem to be crazy: naive, impractical, irresponsible. Immersed in what some call “consensus reality,” one’s very sanity comes into question for believing the principles of interbeing.

We are permitted to entertain them as a kind of spiritual philosophy, but when we start making choices from them, when we start living them even ten percent, people begin to question our sanity. We may even question our own. Alongside the self doubt comes a profound feeling of alienation.

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We are social animals and need at least a little bit of affirmation. We cannot stay in a deviant story by ourselves; in the face of a whole society that pulls us into the Story of Separation, we need allies. This book is meant to be such an ally. I hope that it will awaken or reinforce your understanding that you are not crazy after all, and that if anything it is the world that has gone insane

You might say I am preaching to the choir. Yes. But as a member of the choir myself, I am grateful for the wonderful preachers whose words have kept me here, kept me believing. We hold each other in new beliefs. “Yes, I see it too. You are not crazy.” We, the choir, gather, and we learn to sing together. And as things fall apart and the old story releases its thralls into the space between stories, the beautiful music of our choir will beckon, and they will come join us in song. We have been doing important work, first in loneliness, then in small, marginal groups. The time is upon us for the new Story of the People to leave the incubator. When things fall apart, the hopelessly radical becomes common sense. Our unreasonable hope is pointing us toward something true.

Sometimes when I encounter pioneers in a certain domain of alternative culture, I get the feeling that even if they are doing their work on a small scale, perhaps within a small ecovillage, an isolated prison, a single community in a war zone or gang zone, that they are doing that work on behalf of us all, and that the changes they make in themselves

create a kind of template that the rest of us can follow, and do in a short time what took them decades of effort and learning.

So it may very well be through others hearing about it that our personal, relational, or local transformations have global significance. It may also be through the ripple effect of changed people changing other people. These are both mechanisms of transmission, of cause and effect, that our Separation-conditioned minds can accept. What we have trouble accepting, though, is that the effect of our actions doesn't depend on these mechanisms, which are merely means for the implementation of a general metaphysical law. Even if no one ever finds out about your act of compassion, even if the only visible witness is a dying person, the effect is no less than if someone makes a feature documentary about it.

There is a kind of senselessness in the most beautiful acts. The acts that change the world most profoundly are the ones that the mind of Separation cannot fathom. And usually there must first be a latency, a time of doing something for its own sake, a time of inward focus on the goal and not the "meta" goal. The magic comes from that place. From there, the synchronicities flow; there is no sense of forcing, only of participating in a larger happening that seems to have an intelligence of its own. You show up in the right place, at the right time. You respond to practical needs.

So many voices lobby us to forget love, forget humanity, sacrifice the present and the real for the sake of what seems more practical. Herein lies the medicine of despair: by evacuating our illusions of practicality, it reconnects us to the present needs at hand and allows those senseless, impractical acts that generate miracles.

If everything has consciousness, then what we had believed possible, practical, and realistic is far too limiting. We are on the cusp of an epochal breakthrough, coming into touch with the mind of nature. What can we achieve when we

are in harmony with it? I mean “get real” as the opposite of its usual meaning, which would be to ignore the unmeasurable and the subjective in favor of what can be quantified and controlled. That mentality has put vast human capacities out of reach: the technologies of reunion that include much of what we call “alternative” or “holistic” today. All draw in one way or another from the principle of interbeing.

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A friend recently asked me, “If it is true that we live at a unique juncture in the planet’s history, when all great beings have gathered for the crucial moment of humanity’s birthing, then why do we not see the great avatars and miracle-workers of yesteryear?” My answer was that they are here, but they are working behind the scenes. One of them might be a nurse, a garbage man, a kindergarten teacher. They don’t do anything big or public, nothing that, through our eyes, looks like it is generating the miracles necessary to save our world. Our eyes deceive us. These people are holding the fabric of the world together. They are holding the space for the rest of us to step into.

We need miracles. We have caught a glimpse of our destination, the destination that hope foretells, but we have no idea how to get there. We walk an invisible path with no map and cannot see where any turning will lead. I wish I could say that the new story provides a map, but it does not. It can, however, remove the disorienting fog of habits and beliefs, leftovers of the old paradigms, that obscure our internal guidance system.

You may have noticed that very generous people themselves attract more gifts. Therefore, if we are giving our lives in service, we will experience more of these fortuitous events. These are key to a creative potency beyond the old conception of causality. Anything worth devoting a life to

today requires some of these miracles, these things that we do not and cannot make happen, that come as gifts. Therefore, if you follow your heart's guidance toward any of these worthwhile goals, your choices will seem to many (and sometimes to yourself) a little bit crazy.

Perhaps you have felt yourself in a place where everything seems to flow, where you find yourself again and again at the right place at the right time to encounter exactly the right person? Where everything needed shows up, sometimes at the last minute, in completely unanticipated ways? Where an invisible outside power seems to be coordinating everything and everyone? How and why does this happen? If we could somehow master the technology of being in the right place at the right time, if we could learn to ride the flow of synchronicity, then we would have accessed a power greater than anything the world of Separation is capable of.

This world of miracles, the things we cannot make happen, is a world of the gift. To live in it we must let go of the old ways of controlling, keeping, and holding back. We must learn to see the world through the eyes of the gift. Today most of us live simultaneously in both worlds, the old and the new; therefore our experience of miracles is haphazard. They seem to violate the laws of the physical or social universe, which is to be expected, as those laws are formed from the perceptions of the separate self.



The first step in creating change, then, is to receive a vision that feels true. The second step is to heal the wounds and doubts that that vision illuminates. Without doing that, we will be conflicted, simultaneously enacting both the new story and the old one that accompanies the wounds. The third step is to bow into service to that which wants to be born. This

process is not linear. Usually, the vision comes more and more into focus as we heal the doubts that obscure it; that, in turn, allows us to enter more deeply into its service. Deeper service, in turn, brings up new dimensions of the vision along with deeper wounds. The path of service is a path of self-realization.

To be fully in service to something one has experienced as real is the essence of leadership in a nonhierarchical age. A leader is the holder of a story, someone whose experience of its reality is deep enough so that she can hold the belief on behalf of others. The deeper our service to that which wants to be born, the more it is able to arrange the synchronistic encounters and fortuitous events that allow us to accomplish that which lies beyond our understanding of cause and effect. We might say that the primary “technology” of the Age of Reunion is service. We offer our time, energy, skills, and lives as gifts, stepping into trust, letting go of the habit of looking first and foremost after one’s self. Only then can we fully align with the vision. From that alignment, a tremendous force is born.

The more people who have stepped into gratitude, generosity, and trust and left some amount of fear-based thinking behind, the more receptive the sociopolitical climate will be to radical reform, which will embody the values of interbeing. And the more our systems change to embody these values, the easier it will be for people to make the personal transition. When we no longer hold a rigid self/other distinction, then we recognize that the world mirrors the self; that to work on the self it is necessary to work in the world, and to work effectively in the world, it is necessary to work on the self. Of course, there have always been spiritual practitioners who are politically active and political activists who are deeply spiritual, but now the attraction of each realm to the other is becoming irrepressible.

We are on the brink of a wholesale metamorphosis. We will never embrace the technologies of interbeing from the mentality of Separation. These technologies are not a magic bullet, though I do think, in the end, they will indeed be part of our healing. But a shift in our perceptions, in our worldview, comes first. At the present juncture, the primary importance of the technologies of interbeing isn't in what they can do. It is that they puncture the reality bubble in which we have lived, showing us that neither we nor the world is what we thought.

### *Story of the Three Seeds*

Once upon a time, the tribe of humanity embarked upon a long journey called Separation. It was not a blunder as some, seeing its ravages upon the planet, might think; nor was it a fall, nor an expression of some innate evil peculiar to the human species. It was a journey with a purpose: to experience the extremes of Separation, to develop the gifts that come in response to it, and to integrate all of that in a new Age of Reunion. But we knew at the outset that there was danger in this journey: that we might become lost in Separation and never come back. We might become so alienated from nature that we would destroy the very basis of life; we might become so separated from each other that our poor egos, left naked and terrified, would become incapable of rejoining the community of all being. In other words, we foresaw the crisis we face today. That is why, thousands of years ago, we planted three seeds that would sprout at the time that our journey of Separation reached its extreme. Three seeds, three transmissions from the past to the future, three ways of preserving and transmitting the truth of the world, the self, and how to be human.

Imagine you were alive thirty thousand years ago and had a vision of all that was to come: symbolic language,

naming and labeling the world; agriculture, the domestication of the wild, dominion over other species and the land; the Machine, the mastery of natural forces; the forgetting of how beautiful and perfect the world is; the atomization of society; a world where humans fear even to drink of the streams and rivers, where we live among strangers and don't know the people next door, where we kill across the planet with the touch of a button, where the seas turn black and the air burns our lungs, where we are so broken that we dare not remember that it isn't supposed to be this way. Imagine you saw it all coming. How would you help people thirty thousand years thence? How would you send information, knowledge, aid over such a vast gulf of time?

Maybe this actually happened. So, we came up with the three seeds. The first seed was the wisdom lineages: lines of transmission going back thousands of years that have preserved and protected essential knowledge. From adept to disciple, in every part of the world, various wisdom traditions have passed down teachings in secret. Wisdom keepers, Sufis, Zen masters, Kabbalists, Taoist wizards, Christian mystics, Hindu swamis, and many others, hiding within each religion, kept the knowledge safe until the time when the world would be ready to reclaim it. That time is now, and they have done their job well.

Many spiritual leaders, even the Dalai Lama, are saying that the time of secrets is over. Released too early, the knowledge was co-opted, abused, or usually just ignored. When we had still not covered the territory of Separation, when we still aspired to widening our conquest of nature, when the story of humanity's Ascent was not yet complete, we weren't ready to hear about union, connectedness, interdependency, interbeing. We thought the answer was more control, more technology, more logic, a better-engineered society of rational ethics, more control over matter, nature,

and human nature. But now the old paradigms are failing, and human consciousness has reached a degree of receptivity that allows this seed to spread across the earth. It has been released, and it is growing inside of us en masse.

The second seed was the sacred stories: myths, legends, fairy tales, folklore, and the perennial themes that keep reappearing in various guises throughout history. They have always been with us, so that however far we have wandered into the Labyrinth of Separation, we have always had a lifeline, however tenuous and tangled, to the truth. The stories nurture that tiny spark of memory within us that knows our origin and our destination. The ancients, knowing that the truth would be co-opted and distorted if left in explicit form, encoded it into stories. When we hear or read one of these stories, even if we cannot decode the symbolism, we are affected on an unconscious level. Myths and fairy tales represent a very sophisticated psychic technology. Each generation of storytellers, without consciously intending to, transmits the covert wisdom that it learned, unconsciously, from the stories told it.

Without directly contradicting the paradigms of separation and ascent, our myths and stories have smuggled in a very different understanding of reality. Under the cover of “It’s just a story,” they convey emotional, poetic, and spiritual truth that contradicts linear logic, reductionism, determinism, and objectivity. I am not talking here about moralistic tales. Most of those carry little truth. To transmit the second seed, we must humble ourselves to our stories, and not try to use them for our own moralistic ends. They were created by beings far wiser than our modern selves. If you tell or transmit stories, be very respectful of their original form and don’t change them unless you feel a poetic upwelling. Pay attention to which children’s literature has the feel of a true story. Most recent kids’ literature does not. You can

recognize a true story by the way its images linger in your mind. It imprints itself on the psyche. You get the feeling that something else has been transmitted alongside the plot, something invisible. Usually, such stories bear rich symbolism often unknown even to their authors. A comparison of two twentieth-century children's books illustrates my point: compare a Berenstain Bears story with *How the Grinch Stole Christmas!* Only the latter has a psychic staying power, revealing the spirit of a true story, and it is rich with archetypal symbolism.

The third seed was the indigenous tribes, the people who at some stage opted out of the journey of separation. Imagine that at the outset of the journey, the Council of Humanity gathered and certain members volunteered to abide in remote locations and forgo separation, which meant refusing to enter into an adversarial, controlling relationship to nature, and therefore refusing the process that leads to the development of high technology. It also meant that when they were discovered by the humans who had gone deeply into Separation, they would meet with the most atrocious suffering. That was unavoidable.

These people of the third seed have nearly completed their mission today. Their mission was simply to survive long enough to provide living examples of how to be human. Each tribe carried a different piece, sometimes many pieces, of this knowledge. Many of them show us how to see and relate to the land, animals, and plants. Others show us how to work with dreams and the unseen. Some have preserved natural ways of raising children, now spreading through such books as *The Continuum Concept*. Some show us how to communicate without words—tribes such as the Hadza and the Pirahã communicate mostly in song. Some show us how to free ourselves from the mentality of linear time. All of them exemplify a way of being that we intuitively recognize

and long for. They stir a memory in our hearts, and awaken our desire to return.

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Before they are able to enter a new story, most people—and probably most societies as well—must first navigate the passage out of the old. In between the old and the new there is an empty space. It is a time when the lessons and learnings of the old story are integrated. Only when that work has been done is the old story really complete. Then, there is nothing, the pregnant emptiness from which all being arises. Returning to essence, we regain the ability to act from essence. Returning to the space between stories, we can choose from freedom and not from habit. There is a time to act, and a time to wait, to listen, to observe. Then understanding and clarity can grow. From understanding, action arises that is purposeful, firm, and powerful. To release the habits of separation is therefore more than an issue of self-cultivation; it is also crucial to our effectiveness as activists, healers, and changemakers.

Changing these habits of seeing, thinking, and doing is no trivial matter. First, they must be made visible. Second, we must attempt the change in a way that is not itself among those habits—and so many of the ways we conceive and enact change draw from paradigms of conquest, judgment, and force. Third, we must deal with an environment that enforces the old habits, not only through economic and social means, but through a relentless barrage of subtle messaging that takes for granted the very things we are seeking to change.

There is a kind of grace that protects us in the space between stories. It is not that you won't lose your marriage, your money, your job, or your health. In fact, it is very likely that you will lose one of these things. It is that you will

discover that even having lost that, you are still okay. You will find yourself in closer contact to something much more precious, something that fires cannot burn and thieves cannot steal, something that no one can take and cannot be lost. We might lose sight of it sometimes, but it is always there waiting for us. This is the resting place we return to when the old story falls apart. Clear of its fog, we can now receive a true vision of the next world, the next story, the next phase of life. From the marriage of this vision and this emptiness, a great power is born. I am urging you to trust in that.

\ You needn't contrive to motivate yourself, guilt yourself, or goad yourself into action. Actions taken from that place will be less powerful than the ones that arise unbidden. Trust yourself that you will know what to do, and that you will know when to do it. The more firmly we stand in a larger Story of Self, a Story of Interbeing, the more powerful we become in disrupting the old Story of Separation. As we sober up from our long intoxication with this story, we have the chance to enter a “more comprehensive mode of consciousness”—the consciousness of story. In it, we ask ourselves, “What story shall I stand in?”

The world as we know it is built on a story. To be a change agent is, first, to disrupt the existing Story of the World, and second, to tell a new Story of the World so that those entering the space between stories have a place to go. Often, these two functions merge into one, since the actions we take that are part of the telling of a new story are also disruptive to the old.

The most direct way to disrupt the Story of Separation at its foundation is to give someone an experience of nonseparation. An act of generosity, forgiveness, attention, truth, or unconditional acceptance offers a counterexample to the worldview of separation, violating such tenets as “Everyone is out for themselves,” and affirming the innate

desire to give, create, love, and play. Such acts are invitations only— they cannot compel someone to soften Separation-based belief systems.

Working on the level of story has two dimensions. First is to disrupt the old, which says, “What you thought was real is just an illusion.” Second is to offer the new, which says, “The possible, and the real, are much grander than you knew.” The first, we experience as crisis and breakdown. The second, we experience as miraculous. That’s what a miracle is: not the intercession of an external divinity in worldly affairs that violates the laws of physics, but something that is impossible from within an old Story of the World and possible from a new one.

Miracle is the name we give to the light that shines through from a larger, more radiant world. It says not only that reality is bigger than we thought it was, but that that bigger reality is coming soon. It is both a glimpse and a promise. To the extent that we ourselves are living in the realization of interbeing, we too are able to become miracle-workers. That doesn’t mean that what we do seems miraculous to ourselves—it fits in with our expanded understanding of the nature of life and causality.

Choose the story that best embodies who you really are, who you wish to be, and who you are in fact becoming. Behind the fog of helplessness of the question “Will we make it?” is a gateway to our power to choose and to create. Because written on its threshold is another question, the real question: “Who am I?”....Are you a discrete and separate individual in a world of other? Or are you the totality of all relationships, converging at a particular locus of attention?

We see others through the same lens as we see ourselves. Seeing others as interbeings who desire deeply to give and be of service, we will engage them accordingly, holding the space for them to see themselves that way too

We look at everyone around us, including those we would have seen as opponents and all the people we judged, and we now telegraph to them, “I know you. You are a magnificent divine being who thirsts to express that divinity in service. You, like me, want to apply your gifts toward the creation of a more beautiful world and become strong in it.” Being strong in it, one can hold that story open for other people. Even if someone cannot, in a moment of crisis or when facing her own initiation, believe in the Story of Interbeing, a strong, initiated person can believe it for her, holding that possibility open until she is ready to step into it. With each initiation we become stronger carriers, and our words and actions become part of that story’s telling

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The silence, the stillness, the soil, the water, the body, the eyes, the voice, the song, birth, death, pain, loss—observe one thing that unifies all these places in which we can find truth. In all of them, what is really happening is that *truth is finding us. It comes as a gift.* That is what is right about both the Scientific Method and the religious teaching of an absolute truth outside human creation. Both embody humility. This same state of humility is where we can source the truth to anchor our stories.

We are evolving, being born into a vast new territory, each one of us exploring a different part of it. And a newborn is fragile and dependent, able to remain in the world only with the nurturing of those already established in it. So it is also when we are born into a new dimension of the Story of Interbeing. To stay there, we need help from the people who already inhabit it and have mastered its ways. Enlightenment is a group project.

I keep meeting twenty-somethings who carry a wisdom and generosity that just blows me away. They have a kind of

intelligence that I couldn't have touched when I was twenty-five." Everywhere I go, I find the same thing: young people who were seemingly born into the understandings it took my generation decades of hard struggle to achieve. And they inhabit these understandings so much more fully. A journey that took us decades takes them months. The patterning of the old world has a very superficial hold on them. Sometimes they don't need to go through the same process of unraveling and breakdown to leave it behind. All that is needed is an initiation, an attunement, and they shift fully into the new. We older generations hold the space for them to step into, but once there they go further than we ever could.

The new story is reaching critical mass. But has it reached it? Will it reach it? Perhaps not quite yet. Perhaps it is just at a tipping point, a moment of equipoise. Perhaps it needs just the weight of one more person taking one more step into interbeing to swing the balance. Perhaps that person is you.

*A PDF of the entire The More Beautiful World Our Hearts Know Is Possible book is available to read and download here: [yes-pdf.com/book/1310](http://yes-pdf.com/book/1310) or here: [crisrieder.org/thejourney/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/The-More-Beautiful-World-Our-Hearts-Know-I-Charles-Eisenstein.pdf](http://crisrieder.org/thejourney/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/The-More-Beautiful-World-Our-Hearts-Know-I-Charles-Eisenstein.pdf)*

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*The last chapter from this book is a story included here in its entirety:*

## ***The Gathering of the Tribe***

Once upon a time a great tribe of people lived in a world far away from ours. Whether far away in space, or in

time, or even outside of time, we do not know. They lived in a state of enchantment and joy that few of us today dare to believe could exist, except in those exceptional peak experiences when we glimpse the true potential of life and mind.

One day the elders of the tribe called a meeting. They gathered around, and one of them spoke very solemnly. "My friends," she said, "there is a world that needs our help. It is called Earth, and its fate hangs in the balance. Its humans have reached a critical point in their collective birthing, the same point our own planet was at one million years ago, and they will be stillborn without our help. Who would like to volunteer for a mission to this time and place, and render service to humanity?"

"Tell us more about this mission," they asked.

"It is no small thing. Our shaman will put you into a deep, deep trance, so complete that you will forget who you are. You will live a human life, and in the beginning you will completely forget your origins. You will forget even our language and your own true name. You will be separated from the wonder and beauty of our world, and from the love that bathes us all. You will miss it deeply, yet you will be unable to name what you are missing. You will remember the love and beauty that we know to be normal only as a longing in your heart. Your memory will take the form of an intuitive knowledge, as you plunge into the painfully marred Earth, that a more beautiful world is possible.

"As you grow up in that world, your knowledge will be under constant assault. You will be told in a million ways that a world of destruction, violence, drudgery, anxiety, and degradation is normal. You may go through a time when you are completely alone, with no allies to affirm your knowledge of a more beautiful world. You may plunge into a depth of despair that we, in our world of light, cannot imagine. But no

matter what, a spark of knowledge will never leave you. A memory of your true origin will be encoded in your DNA. That spark will lie within you, inextinguishable, until one day it is awakened.

“You see, even though you will feel, for a time, utterly alone, you will not be alone. We will send you assistance, help that you will experience as miraculous, experiences that you will describe as transcendent. These will fan that spark into a flame. For a few moments or hours or days, you will reawaken to the beauty and the joy that is meant to be. You will see it on Earth, for even though the planet and its people are deeply wounded, there is beauty there still, projected from past and future onto the present as a promise of what is possible and a reminder of what is real.

“After that glimpse, the flame may die down into an ember again as the routines of normal life there swallow you up. But after each awakening, they will seem less normal, and the story of that world will seem less real. The ember will glow brighter. When enough embers do that, they will all burst into flame together and sustain each other.

“Because remember, you will not be there alone. As you begin to awaken to your mission you will meet others of our tribe. You will recognize them by your common purpose, values, and intuitions, and by the similarity of the paths you have walked. As the condition of the planet Earth reaches crisis proportions, your paths will cross more and more. The time of loneliness, the time of thinking you might be crazy, will be over.

“You will find the people of your tribe all over the Earth, and become aware of them through the long-distance communication technologies used on that planet. But the real shift, the real quickening, will happen in face-to-face gatherings in special places. When many of you gather together you will launch a new stage on your journey, a

journey that, I assure you, will end where it begins right now. Then, the mission that lay unconscious within you will flower into consciousness. Your intuitive rebellion against the world presented to you as normal will become an explicit quest to create a more beautiful one.”

A woman said, “Tell us more about the time of loneliness, that we might prepare for it.”

The elder said, “In the time of loneliness, you will always be seeking to reassure yourself that you are not crazy. You will do that by telling people all about what is wrong with the world, and you will feel a sense of betrayal when they don’t listen to you. You might hunger for stories of wrongness, atrocity, and ecological destruction, all of which confirm the validity of your intuition that a more beautiful world exists. But after you have fully received the help we will send you, and the quickening of your gatherings, you will no longer need to do that. Because you will know. Your energy will thereafter turn toward actively creating that more beautiful world.”

A tribeswoman asked, “How do you know this will work? Are you sure our shaman’s powers are great enough to send us on such a journey?”

The elder replied, “I know it will work because he has done it many times before. Many have already been sent to Earth, to live human lives, and to lay the groundwork for the mission you will undertake now. He’s been practicing! The only difference now is that many of you will venture there at once. What is new in the time you will live in, is that you will gather in critical mass, and each awaken the other to your mission. The heat you will generate will kindle the same spark that lies in every human being, for in truth, each one is from a tribe like ours. The whole galaxy and beyond is converging on Earth, for never before has a planet journeyed

so far into Separation and made it back again. Those of you who go will be part of a new step in cosmic evolution.”

A tribesman asked, “Is there a danger we will become lost in that world, and never wake up from the shamanic trance? Is there a danger that the despair, the cynicism, the pain of separation will be so great that it will extinguish the spark of hope, the spark of our true selves and origin, and that we will be separated from our beloved ones forever?”

The elder replied, “That is impossible. The more deeply you get lost, the more powerful the help we will send you. You might experience it at the time as a collapse of your personal world, the loss of everything important to you. Later you will recognize the gift within it. We will never abandon you.”

Another man asked, “Is it possible that our mission will fail, and that this planet, Earth, will perish?”

The elder replied, “I will answer your question with a paradox. It is impossible that your mission will fail. Yet, its success hangs on your own actions. The fate of the world is in your hands. The key to this paradox lies within you, in the feeling you carry that each of your actions, even your personal, secret struggles, has cosmic significance. You will know then, as you know now, that everything you do matters.”

There were no more questions. The volunteers gathered in a circle, and the shaman went to each one. The last thing each was aware of was the shaman blowing smoke in his or her face. They entered a deep trance and dreamed themselves into the world where we find ourselves today

*A beautiful animation of Charles reading this story is available at [youtube.com/watch?v=XinVOpdcbVc](https://youtube.com/watch?v=XinVOpdcbVc)*

## *Chapter Five*

# *The Ageless Wisdom of Nancy Roof*

*An Interview by Rhonda Fabian*

*Kosmos Journal: Global Transformation in Harmony with All Life is based on evolving interior development and cultural values as they impact globalization and world community. In 2023, a friend of the editor suggested they devote an issue to the theme Ageless Spirit. She was referring to wise elders still working among us, like Kosmos' founder, Nancy Roof. From that came this interview with Nancy by Kosmos' current editor, Rhonda Fabian.*



*Nancy and Rhonda*

**Rhonda:** *The impulse that started Kosmos more than 20 years ago must have been very strong with everything going on at that time. What was it that really called Kosmos into being?*

**Nancy Roof:** *Kosmos* was originally called *Spirituality and Reality*. The two colleagues, Ven. Chung OK Lee, Head Minister of the Manhattan Won-Buddhist Temple and Co-President of World

Conference on Religions and Peace from South Korea and Abdelkader Abbadi, UN Political Affairs from Morocco, and I had just published a book called *A Vision for the New Civilization*. We were concerned about the materialistic culture and separative mindsets of the time that led not only to conflicts between individuals but also between nations. We believed that putting a spotlight on values and spirituality underlying these problems could help bring nations and citizens closer together in harmony and peace. After the first two issues of *Spirituality and Reality* were published my colleagues moved on to other projects. It now became my responsibility to rename and design what eventually became *Kosmos Journal*.

*You decided to publish it as a beautiful keepsake print journal, but you didn't necessarily know a lot about publishing!*

I knew nothing about journalism or publishing! Our approach was planetary, distinguishing between corporate globalization and planetary care and concern. New advisors from various countries gathered around our mission of transformation. Every continent was represented. We attracted the intellectual rigor of pioneers and visionaries in collective systems—education, government, economics, science, environment and more, as well as those whose work reflected a sensibility to heart and soul. Rather than analyzing the separate systems, we sought their wholeness and interdependence.

We looked for the kind of beauty that touched and even stunned the heart into opening, through images that reflected the sacredness we felt. Unlike most journals we sent a message of love, care, warmth, and wisdom that inspired healing and active participation in our readers. It was original

and unique based on the recognition that we were entering a new paradigm.

It took enormous courage to overcome my fear of failure. Unshakable trust in inner guidance gave me the energy and vitality to say “Yes.” I worked seven days a week without exhaustion or struggle. According to Taoist philosophy, when we try to control and force outcomes, we create frustration and chaos. When we let go of control and allow things to happen we flow effortlessly with the natural energy of the universe. Kosmos arrived and I simply followed the flow.

*Essays are made: they are constructed  
over time, like drystone walls.*

*Poetry arrives: it drops from the sky like dew,  
and is shaped as it flows onto the page.*

*Paul Kingsnorth*

*If I’m correct, you started Kosmos around the age of 70. What was it at that moment in your life that inspired you so deeply?*

I think that my whole life experience was essential to the founding of Kosmos. Discovering the Ageless Wisdom in my 30’s after a painful Dark Night of the Soul—co-founding *The Mountain School for Esoteric studies*, earning a PhD in Transpersonal Psychology, developing courses in experiential education, becoming a mentor for many spiritual aspirants, being pulled to participate in the United Nations, co-founding the Values Caucus and then the Spiritual Caucus at the UN, developing and leading trauma programs for war-torn Yugoslavia, co-authoring *A Vision for a New Civilization*. My life was full of active service projects. I traveled around the world presenting a vision of the new civilization based on

spiritual values. It was time to bring all these experiences together and share with a wider audience.

*You speak of inner guidance or a voice within that you're able to attune to and receive from. Tell me more about that and how it evolved in your lifetime, this inner knowing.*

It all began with a self-developed experiment in my early 30's. I experimented with how I made decisions, some by rational thinking and analysis and the others by energetic impulse, being drawn in a particular direction. As a result of the experiment I realized that I was inwardly guided towards the right approach to situations in life by a dynamic inner energy that superseded rational analysis. I would follow that energy for the rest of my life.

Another transformative experience dropped into my awareness at a difficult period in my life. I felt unloved and desperate. I even contemplated suicide. I was divorced and living on \$75 a week, supporting three beloved children and working two jobs. One day I was stunned by the beauty of a delicate creamy pink flower image. It just dropped into my mind. And it spoke to me. *"You are looking for love in the wrong places. Love is a part of you. You just need to BE love. You can smile at a stranger anywhere. You can give love wherever you are."*

This realization totally changed my life. I now believe this transformative experience signaled a movement towards living more as soul. Love and beauty became central to my life and have expanded ever since. The beauty of that delicate flower has stayed with me throughout my life as a sacred symbol of transcendent love. It is this kind of beauty I tried to share with *Kosmos*.

*I'm always struck by your ability to act from Presence—loving kindness and detachment—even to the point of*

*letting go of people and things – including Kosmos to a great degree.*

I was very identified with the work I did internationally for *Kosmos*. I had a very active life traveling and having the honor of meeting visionaries of the new paradigm. This had to end as I got older. You were there, dear Rhonda to carry *Kosmos* into its next phase. One of the most important decisions we have to make in life is when to let go and give the younger generation the opportunity to bring their new ideas into the work. It seems that as people live longer now, they are less able to let go. causing numerous problems in our political and social culture.

It took some time to slow down and let go after many years of active service in the world. I was concerned about whether and how I could still contribute in some way. Polio symptoms returned from 70 years ago when I was completely paralyzed except for my hands. Although housebound by necessity, I was ready and eager to drop out of society completely and spend my remaining days engaged in deepening my understanding and experience of consciousness. My meditations had been focused on heart and soul, appropriate for an active period of service. Now they shifted to spirit and nonduality appropriate to my new stage of contemplation.

Another letting go was to follow. I was diagnosed with incurable kidney failure and given six months to live. Accepting this reality, I now prepared for death. The ageless wisdom taught that death is a continuation of life on a different plane beyond spacetime. I was ready. Deepening my knowledge and practice of nonduality helped me acclimate to other planes of consciousness. Sleep became important. Deep sleep is the closest experience to death we have every night and I wanted to know more.

Miraculously, my ‘incurable’ kidneys began to heal, leading to an abrupt reversal of focus. Again, I was waiting to discover the right direction through spiritual impulse, rather than rational thought. What excites me and makes me feel alive now? In addition to research and practice of inner consciousness, I detect an aliveness around understanding how the religious impulse will be manifested in these liminal times and in the new paradigm.

I am interacting most of the time with my dogs, Willy and Sophia. I am fascinated by the potential of inter-species love and the responsibility we have to help them unfold their full potential.

I got rid of the oxygen equipment supplied by Hospice and filled my room with living plants. I am drawn to the magical images of the new cosmology and the influence of the solar and galactic environment surrounding planet earth and am into the new physics. I’m intrigued by scientific discoveries that corroborate what the ageless wisdom discovered centuries ago.

I’m reading the post-modernists who are starting to develop a wholistic approach to life that includes “souls, systems, and societies” as per Jonathon Rowson and *Perspectiva* and warm data of Nora Bateson. Rather than beliefs and rational ideologies there is a demand for immersion in experiential learning that deepens our living experience of the sacred. The ageless wisdom is beginning to unfold into the mainstream and young souls are bringing in fresh ideas such as *Presencing* through Otto Scharmer.

Perhaps I’m still alive today to be one of those voices that supports and lives a new consciousness of expanded relationships and care both horizontally and vertically. Sitting in my wheelchair with my dogs and plants and the luxury of time, I feel more connected to the worlds than ever before

through the internet externally and through expanded consciousness internally.

*I'm hopeful that this quality of awakening is arising in many different sectors, many different people, despite these very difficult times. My teacher says Nirvana is all around us, but we don't realize it most of the time. What do you think of that?*

I believe there is Life from the beginning. It is in the seed, ready to be discovered as it unfolds in our lives. We are aware and respond based on our consciousness. Our task is to uncover the loving Oneness and interrelationships that enfold our world by letting go of what is obstructing realization and listening silently to what is coming.

*Beautiful. Nancy, the theme of this issue of Kosmos is Ageless Spirit. You are an ageless spirit, an elder who's shining wisdom and light from your heart into the world. And there are other spiritual teachers, some in their nineties or older, who by their very existence, are still adding much to the collective consciousness. Ageless Spirit also speaks to the vast nameless wisdom that has existed since the start of time. In your 94 years, how are these two ideas related?*

I was very fortunate to discover the ageless wisdom teachings when I was in my 30's. My early influences included Alice Bailey, Psychosynthesis, Jungian analysis, Sri Aurobindo, Ken Wilber and more. My PhD in transpersonal psychology expanded the learning to a variety of religious approaches, experiential education and alternative medicine. The endless search continues today as physics widens the field and new wisdom comes to light in an alive and unfolding universe.

I do want to say something about my perception of spirituality as I perceive and live it, based on the ageless

wisdom. Meditation, study, and service are the foundation. Self-mastery of our physical, emotional, and mental bodies involves identifying and letting go of obstructions to unfoldment. Life situations test our progress on this difficult path. More than sitting meditation, it involves continuous awareness of our interior self throughout the day and night, remaining in a state of awareness in the Now. Past and future are recognized as merely thoughts. What is real is the present. It is a never-ending process of letting go of the conditioning we're born with as individuals (karma) and enculturated to as members of society.

With no responsibilities outside of my own household I have more opportunity to live moment to moment in the Now, just *being* awareness, flowing with universal energy. I am deeply grateful to be graced with the freedom of this time.

*Yes, I have witnessed your transformation these past few years. You have a kind of ageless translucence. I think there's a difference between getting 'older' and getting 'elder.' If we just get older, clinging to our fears, we're likely to become anxious about change. Whereas those who are 'elder' often are quite joyful, love being with young people, and are delighted to share and to learn. It comes back to this process of letting go, or letting be.*

One of the hardest decisions life brought to me was letting go of people I loved who unknowingly interfered with my spiritual unfoldment. Tears come to my eyes just thinking of the deep angst I felt.

*This is a the seeker's journey. You want to share the fruits with your loved ones and others around you, but there's also a time when some relationships no longer nourish.*

The beauty is that even though they are not in our outer life, they are in our hearts. We can still love them, though perhaps the relationship was difficult.

*So here we are in this moment, and so many of the things that you intuited, that Kosmos presented, that you spoke about have come to pass. Now what?*

If we fully accept the reality of the present it gives us a clue as to the next step of unfoldment. Aggression, conflict, violence, and confrontation are rampant and increasing. Lies and deception make it difficult or impossible to know what is real, and artificial intelligence increases the possibility of distorted information and images. Traditional religion is waning. Institutions are collapsing and attempts to fix them with more of the same are not succeeding. Materialistic science does not accept phenomenological evidence and values. Suicide, depression and loss of meaning are rising. Families and communities have lost a sense of human connection and belonging. Some believe the metacrisis will destroy the human race and have built bunkers to survive. The sense of powerlessness over the pain and suffering is acute. Many feel there is no way out.

Others believe that technology will save us. Despite its many benefits, there has been a price to pay. Extreme cold rationalism has overshadowed the heart and soul of our individual and collective lives. There is a yearning to move beyond the artificiality of machines. We miss the warmth of human contact. We are out of balance. According to Iain McGilchrist's important research, the left brain hemisphere's focus on *quantitative* way of knowing has eclipsed the right brain's *qualitative* way of knowing. Heart and soul have no place in a culture of machines that threatens to destroy our humanity.

Now What? Doing more of the same has only increased the metacrisis. I believe it's inevitable that we will discover that the deeper dimensions of our problems originate within. As the pain increases we will recognize that we have the wisdom and power to operate from a higher consciousness. We will experience an explosion of spiritual experiments applying the ageless wisdom to the culture of the times. Letting go of extreme rationalism and fostering intuition, imagination, feelings, poetry and spiritual impulses will become acceptable ways of knowing, bringing back heart and soul.

New leadership will not negotiate or compromise fundamental values, but will take a firm stand for what is right. Science will accept phenomenological evidence and more research will corroborate the ageless wisdom. The power to change is within, not outside of ourselves. Decentralization of power and hierarchies of “experts” in other areas will give more power to the people as well. We will realize that we are responsible for changing the world and that we have the capacity to do so – within.

Just like I once looked for love in the wrong places, now our culture is looking in the wrong places for peace. The answers were always within.

*That's heartening. And as excruciating as it is to bear witness to and social responsibility for suffering and death in so many places, I believe somewhere in my depths that we're always in the process of unfolding creation, unfolding consciousness. We don't need a meteor or volcanoes to have another extinction. We're doing plenty that could bring it about in an instant—in an instant we could be gone. And yet there's something so deep within me that gestures toward a different possibility. When Jesus said, “forgive them for they know not what they do,” I think he means we are*

*unconscious. We are unaware that we are creating all of this suffering with our own minds. We're unaware. Heaven on earth is possible, is available this very moment.*

*You've shared so much wisdom in this hour Nancy, what is it that you would like to ultimately say about Life to your loved ones who will certainly read this?*

The first thing that comes to mind is the extraordinary healing capacity of beauty. One magical precious flower softened my heart and destroyed my fears. It has led me to experience the deep calmness and love that surrounds us even in our pain.

Those who study the ageless wisdom are aware that the universe is organized around cycles and rhythms of transformation. Dark times precede transformative breakthroughs. We are called to dig deeper to understand and address the metacrisis. This means letting go of belief systems that sustain the dysfunctional society we live in. It involves an acceptance of the incompleteness of who we are. It involves the responsibility to work toward unfolding our full interior potential. We have the capacity to love and care for all beings. In truth, it is the foundation of who we are.

*We are bread and wine to each other...you have been that to me, Nancy. I can't express in words how transformational it has been to be near you, to know you, to work with you, to love you, to steward Kosmos. Thank you.*

Thank you. I'm so grateful that Kosmos is in your hands. I give it to you freely with love.

*And I receive it with love, not as mine, but as an expression of our shared understanding and our shared communion with all.*



*Nancy B. Roof, Ph.D. is Founder and Editor Emeritus of the award-winning Kosmos Journal. She won the 2009 Images and Voices of Hope award for journalism as a tool to inform, inspire and engage individual and collective participation in a global shift to higher-level thinking. As a founder of Transpersonal Psychology (late 70s), she served as a spiritual guide to individuals for 20 years. In the late 80s, she began to define the field of global transformation at the United Nations, where she successfully lobbied for elevated global standards in international treaties and co-founded the Values Caucus (1994) and the Spiritual Caucus (2000).*

*Working with 78 international organizations in war zones for over two years, she recognized the traumatic effect of war, not only on military personnel, but on their families, communities and service providers. She then designed the first global training programs and workbook on secondary traumatic stress, implemented initially during the Balkan wars and now used internationally. Her beloveds are three children, six grandchildren, three great grandchildren, and two very special dogs.*

*This chapter was edited from  
the full article available here:  
[kosmosjournal.org/kj\\_article/nancy-roof-on-ageless-wisdom/](http://kosmosjournal.org/kj_article/nancy-roof-on-ageless-wisdom/)*

## *Chapter Six*

# ***Prophecies of Possibility***

## *A Ripening of the Next World*

*Confronted with narratives of catastrophe and colonialism that restrict her spirit, Afro-Taina author Jamie Figueroa summons the imagination, sovereignty, and courage needed to restore herself and rebirth the world.*

*“We don’t heal by forgetting,  
we heal by remembering.”*

*Leslie Marmon Silko*

There are many kinds of story. A story can simply be a thing. The way dominant culture has turned a river into a thing, sea coral into a thing, a skunk, a stone, a sparrow—all into things. A black man. A brown woman.

Or, a story can be living. It can be an activating force that alters vibration, transcends time, and shifts not only how we perceive, but our shared reality itself. A presence you can feel drawing close to you, taking hold of your hand, pressing its lips to your ear. Moving just beyond the limits of our mental constraints, it is an ever-shifting spirit that penetrates our cells and the infinite possibilities and combinations of beingness encoded there. Together, the story and we—each one of us—become something altogether new..

During a fiction writing workshop I was teaching at the Institute of American Indian Arts, my class became impassioned with story, especially stories of the future. Students spoke to the futuristic movies and novels they cherished, for good reason, many of them iconic/classic. Apocalyptic stories of the future. Dystopian motifs. Not far from where we find ourselves now. For some of us, I'd say, emotionally on point.

At some point, between building on the foundational elements of craft, reading short stories, and considering interviews with contemporary Indigenous writers, class came to a halt. Together we wondered—as writers, as story makers—about how we were creating the future in our work, and thereby our own future off the page. There are those who have prophecies within their own traditional knowledge systems. Then there are those of us in a lifelong process of repair and rematriation<sup>1</sup> with our traditional knowledge systems who are creating our own prophecies. The voltage of imagining that power pricked down the backs of our necks. “Your stories can and will not only change your own lives, but they have the potential to change our shared realities. What kind of world do you want to inhabit? What are the stories that will make it so?” I asked. “Can we even imagine such a thing?” Our pens seemed to stand at attention, waiting. Daring us.



As a writer struggling to find the time to create my art, I housesat, slept on couches, rented a single room when I could. I knew how to be mobile, my root structure held not within a single residence but within the grace and generosity of friends. Then, I partnered, found secure employment that allowed me to write every day from the same room in our home. I grew pregnant and birthed our son, and, somehow, I

managed to spend nearly five years at one address. In our new situation, I was not as flexible as I had once been. We were still in the pandemic: the stress of staying safe, the extreme vigilance, had contorted and permanently marked us. I felt raw, more and more with each passing encounter.

One feminine expression of the Divine from my own Afro-Taíno Caribbean lineage is *Ciguapa*. *Ciguapa* embodies “intuition, instinct and sovereignty.” She calls to us from the edge of *la selva*, the forest; the wild, unpredictable place. *Come with me*, she urges us, *and behold your true knowing*. A knowing that has not been compromised by religion or philosophies, by cultural failings or societal dictates, by what you have or do not have, how you look or do not look, by your origins or by your citizenry. *Ciguapa* possesses uninterrupted power, our expression of creativity—undiluted life force—which is in direct opposition to the ongoing colonial project. Her backwards feet make her impossible to track, impossible to be trapped. She doesn’t submit to any external authority but instead sneaks up on villagers and tries to entice them to come with her—to leave their routines and limitations, which anchor them in their own constructions of self; she nudges, or outright drags them into another realm, an unknown experience that renders them strangers to themselves. Out of this death of the familiar and disorientation within, a new iteration or personhood is born.

To consider a future beyond what I’d experienced but desperately wanted, to imagine such a thing, I needed to hear women speak, and through them, hear the combined knowing, warnings, and wisdom of their ancestors. Despite my own mother’s failings and our rupture, I’m deeply devoted to the archetype of mother, of grandmother, and seek divine feminine expression to help me navigate my life. The Indigenous women and mothers who formed my council

included Dr. Marianela Medrano, Sherri Mitchell, and Dr. Renda Madrigal, all of whom are making significant contributions to their communities and cultivating positive change far beyond. Their traditional knowledge, their participation in continual creation of new/eternal realities and in healing themselves and others, is essential and extraordinary. When I spoke to each of them in the winter of 2021, I could not imagine that late the following spring I'd be holding to their words as if they were prayer beads.

There are those of us in a lifelong process of repair and rematriation with our traditional knowledge systems who are creating our own prophecies. The Penobscot term, *N'debelomosol s'in*, means, “I own myself.” Sherri Mitchell—a Penobscot Indigenous rights attorney, educator, author, and the founding director of the Land Peace Foundation—warned, “It doesn’t mean I own myself, therefore I have all the rights. It means I own myself and therefore I am the keeper of the balance between the rights and responsibilities that I carry within my being.”

All causes have effects. All choices have consequences. Words and stories have impact. Sherri, however, unpacked it even more: Sound creates vibrations that transcend time and space. Inherent in my freedom are responsibilities. As a human being I own myself. As a writer, I am fashioning reality. What are the details of that world? What am I responsible for? Would I want to inhabit the stories I create?

In my conversation with Sherri, “post-trauma” and “post-colonial” are empty terms, far from living realities. “The danger,” she explained during our conversation, “is that it normalizes the time that we’re living in, which is very much still a time of ongoing colonization. It’s a time of ongoing trauma. She asked, “How many levels of waking do we need to have before we’re outside of this distortion, this

dream, and we're creating a new dream together that is based in harmony and balance and mutual respect and honor of sacred life?"

How can we trace deep knowing through our minds and bodies? How does that knowledge impact our ability to imagine for ourselves and to self-create our futures? Are we working from colonized imaginations with chained predictions, our spirits inhabiting a prison, generations old? "Intuition is accessing the part of me that is still deeply interrelated and interconnected to all things," Sherri said. "The part of me that has existed since the beginning of time, the part of me that has lived every one of the thousand lifetimes and that has retained the knowledge that I have gained through my experience over those lifetimes ... When thinking about intuition, what I'm thinking about is sacred guidance." Not a theory. Not a metaphor. Not magical realism. Just life. Life. Sacred life. And it's this perspective, enlivened and embodied—that understands holding the balance of rights and responsibilities—that is needed in our stories, the restoration of knowing as it pertains to our wholeness and to our belonging.

Like an instrument that had forgotten its own sound, I too, was in need of tuning. So I reorganized how I spent my days, setting aside a portion of time that I owned for myself. In this time, smaller than I wanted, barely present, I wrote. My own private ceremony, my own sacred act. Simultaneously, life was constantly creating all around me, the power of it evident with each breath, everywhere I looked. Its force could not be ignored. It was here I could feel Ciguapa's presence, beckoning us to find our sovereignty and her loyalty to us, regardless of how we may have resisted her for a lifetime, for generations, in order to be safe, to survive

no matter how limited, how impoverished and malnourished, within the cage of assimilation.

Dr. Marianela Medrano, poet, scholar, therapist, founder of Palabra Counseling and Training Center, and of the podcast *What a Word is Worth*, further educated me, a fellow Afro-Taína, on Ciguapa and her persistent, pervasive call. Ciguapa reminds us of “intuitive knowing, instinctual knowing,” Marianela said. “The knowing before we are covered by cultural givens, before the beliefs that severed us from our origin. Our Indigenous knowing. It requires a level of trust in ourselves, in who we are.”

Dr. Renda Madrigal, a Chippewa author, clinical psychologist, and mindfulness facilitator, added to what Marianela said, including that “western civilization diminishes intuitive, instinctual knowing and turns it into something silly.” She related the body’s knowing and intuition to power. “Power in an Indigenous way. When we build our inner power, the power that we have, we can hone and develop it instead of being afraid and cutting ourselves off. It’s so vital in figuring out how to navigate ourselves in this world.”

How do I navigate myself in this world that’s so antithetical to how to live as a human being in a way that gives a real sense of wholeness and well-being—when there’s a fear that comes up in our bodies, the DNA memory?

“There are issues in the tissues” is a common phrase used among somatic therapists when addressing trauma. Our tissues, and all our bodies of knowing, are impacted by trauma: events or a series of events that disrupt our ability to be fully present and connected to ourselves, to our bodies—to our emotional, physical, mental, and/or spiritual bodies. Past and present colonization, to name one. Past and present patriarchy, to name another. The rupture with our own mother, the earth, and any lasting sense of belonging to her

and to each other. *And.* A direct source of knowing lies both within us and beyond us.

“For so many years, we were stigmatizing the wisdom of the body. But, no, the body knew all along. We just need to pay attention. Again, the beautiful, beautiful idea that the body has the medicine within, is not a new idea. It’s Indigenous wisdom,” Marianela said. “Writing and the body are one.” She described how somatic writing, embodied writing, integrates the language the body speaks from the neck down. That writing suffers under force of the intellect but thrives when done in an integrated way, and so do we. “Poetry and the body, they are one.”

Western science has been slow to affirm the wisdom of the body, but neuroscientists now embrace it, acknowledging that the body has three brains, which Renda attested to: “There’s the brain we know and think of all the time, but there’s a brain in our heart and in our gut that we’ve been cut off from by Western society.” She encourages us to “come into our bodies and find the wisdom that resides there” and to “go into the felt experience, the sensations.” Can we restore ourselves and rebirth the world? This is part of what lies in our original knowing.



I continued my practice, grasping at every moment I could find to do so. My writing did what it wanted. Another space where I was not in control. Here was where I surrendered. My hand, guided. The act is everything that I am, and it is, at the same time, beyond me. When I would force it, I lost the signal. I kept a rock in the shape of a conch shell to remind me that to create is to receive. And even when nothing came but grief, I gave myself to that. My own grief as well as grief that seemed beyond me, beyond space and time,

an endless force of it. The twin of life, close and ever present as shadow.

“Writing is very much ceremony,” Renda said, linking it directly with active imagination as a way to cultivate our intuition. She continued, “We have to imagine things for them to happen. We have to imagine differently. I don’t know how people can get through great tragedy and loss without a story. The key to what the world can be is in the imagination. That’s where we’re going to find it.”

Sherri agreed that writing itself is ceremony: “Writing is a download, a download that gets processed within me and then comes out.... When we’re able to engage with what has been downloaded, what we recognize is that we are hearing the whispers of ages. Ideas and notions connected to our deepest truths as part of one living creation.” And like ceremony, writing is necessary.

“I feel honored to be a part of it,” Sherri continued. “The process of transferring that knowledge to the next generation, who will then again carry it forward, cycle it forward, and make it relevant to the time they’re living in, because these are ageless truths. What we’re speaking into being right now is creating the reality they will walk into. Carrying forward this wisdom keeps us connected to the thread of life, and transferring that forward into the future is what’s going to allow them the ability to not only survive but thrive in the reality that we’re creating for them.”

And when the grief threatens to overwhelm? Scars our ability to imagine? When the remembering is so terrible it causes our soul to leave our body? “Maybe it’s joy that calls [the soul] back,” Renda suggested. She believes we encounter joy through sensory experience—a smell, for example—and that once it comes into our bodies it becomes part of our emotional being as well. “Then it acts like a vitamin,” she says. “It stays with you.” It is this sort of embodied

experience of joy that reminds us, again and again, that the world is enchanted—a way of seeing and being that is antithetical to the project of colonization.

“Colonization [has] promoted this idea that the world is not enchanted, that the world is just a resource for us to use, that it’s pretty much dead,” says Renda. “But I believe the world is enchanted and being able to experience this brings us so much more joy. The hawk flying overhead. The signs that show up when you need them. Telling you it’s going to be ok. But you have to believe.”

Instead of dictating how life should behave, we make space and pray, each in our own way, and trust the unknown force of life, the unseen potential moving beneath what we know, moving us closer to and beyond what we can imagine.

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There was and is no way I could explicitly direct my students on how to create their own prophetic stories. I’m unable to determine their details. Truthfully, on many days under the weight of my individual struggle, I’m desperate to find my own. What do I return to? The remembering, the naming, the details, the grief. It’s the grief that births me. My ability to imagine the future I need, and that my family needs, depends on my ability to keep returning to myself and to trust the knowing seeded there. “For thousands of years,” as Sherri said.

Can we claim that the cure is in the wound? That we can enter there, face it, claim it, and—*And*. Transcend it. Imagine beyond it and restore ourselves. Dance and sing the next iteration as we bear our scars, and our ancestors’ scars, our earned inheritance, as if adornment. Dare we? Can we restory ourselves and rebirth the world?

This is part of what lies in our original knowing. Embedded in the great ending is the great beginning. The thresholds overlap. As we challenge our imaginations to show us the futures we want and need, we can make it so—each and every one of us, whole, sovereign—with our stories and the magic of our natural world, our mother, as we are recreated, birthed and birthing. Again, and again.

*Edited from an article in Emergence Magazine*

*[emergencemagazine.org/essay/prophecies-of-possibility](http://emergencemagazine.org/essay/prophecies-of-possibility)*

*'Rematriation is an Indigenous women's led movement and digital storytelling platform dedicated to helping return the sacred to the mother. <https://rematriation.com>*

### *Interlude*

#### *A Trio of Short “Instrument of Love” Stories*

## **Dancing in the Rain**

It was a busy morning, about 8:30, when an elderly gentleman in his 80's arrived to have stitches removed from his thumb. He said he was in a hurry as he had an appointment at 9:00 am.

I took his vital signs and had him take a seat, knowing it would be over an hour before someone would be able to see him. I saw him looking at his watch and decided, since I was not busy with another patient, I would evaluate his wound. On exam, it was well healed, so I talked to one of the doctors, got the needed supplies to remove his sutures and redress his wound.

While taking care of his wound, I asked him if he had another doctor's appointment this morning, as he was in such a hurry. The gentleman told me no, that he needed to go to the nursing home to eat breakfast with his wife. I inquired as to her health. He told me that she had been there for a while and that she was a victim of Alzheimer's disease.

As we talked, I asked if she would be upset if he was a bit late. He replied that she no longer knew who he was, that she had not recognized him in five years now.

I was surprised, and asked him, 'And you still go every morning, even though she doesn't know who you are?' He smiled as he patted my hand and said, 'She doesn't know me, but I still know who she is.' I had to hold back tears as he left, I had goose bumps on my arm, and thought, 'That is the kind of love I want in my life.'

True love is neither physical, nor romantic. True love is an acceptance of all that is, has been, will be, and will not be. The happiest people don't necessarily have the best of everything; they just make the best of everything they have. 'Life isn't about how to survive the storm, but how to dance in the rain.'

*Author unknown*

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## *Angel in Disguise?*

I was driving home from a meeting about 5 o'clock, stuck in traffic, when the car started to choke and sputter and die. I barely managed to coast into a gas station, glad only that I would not be blocking traffic and would have a somewhat warm spot to wait for the tow truck. It wouldn't even turn over.

Before I could make the call, I saw a woman walking out of the Quickie Mart building. Suddenly she appeared to have slipped on some ice, falling onto a gas pump, so I went to see if she was okay.

When I got there, it looked more like she had been overcome by sobs than that she had fallen. She was a young woman who looked really haggard with dark circles under her

eyes. She dropped something as I helped her up, and I picked it up to give it to her. It was a nickel.

At that moment, everything came into focus for me: the crying woman, the ancient car crammed full of stuff with three kids in the back (one in a car seat), and the gas pump reading \$4.95.

I asked her if she was okay and if she needed help, and she just kept saying, 'I don't want my kids to see me crying!' So we stood on the other side of the pump from her car. She said she was driving to California and that things were very hard for her right now. So I asked, 'And you were praying?' That made her back away from me a little, but I assured her I was not a crazy person and said, 'He heard you, and He sent me.'

I took out my card and swiped it through the card reader on the pump so she could fill up her car completely, and while it was fuelling, walked to the next door McDonald's and bought two big bags of food, some gift certificates for more, and a big cup of coffee. She gave the food to the kids in the car, who attacked it like wolves, and we stood by the pump eating fries and talking a little.

She told me her name, and that she lived in Kansas City. Her husband left her two months ago and she had not been able to make ends meet. She knew she wouldn't have money to pay rent after New Year's, so finally, in desperation, had called her parents, with whom she had not spoken in about five years. They lived in California and said she could come and live with them and try to get on her feet there.

So she packed up everything she owned in the car. She told the kids they were going to California for Christmas, but not that they were going to live there. I gave her my gloves, a little hug and said a quick prayer with her for safety on the road. As I was walking over to my car, she said, 'So, are you

like an angel or something?' This made me cry. I said, 'Sweetie, at this time of year angels are really busy, so sometimes God uses regular people.'

It was so incredible to be a part of someone else's miracle. And of course, you guessed it, when I got in my car, it started right away and got me home with no problem. I'll put it in the shop tomorrow to check, but I suspect the mechanic won't find anything wrong.

Sometimes the angels fly close enough to you that you can almost hear the flutter of their wings....

*Written by a Metro Denver Hospice physician – name not available*

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## ***The Cab Ride***

When I arrived at 2:30 a.m., the building was dark, except for a single light in a ground floor window. Under these circumstances, many drivers would just honk once or twice, wait a minute, and then drive away. But I had seen too many impoverished people who depended on taxis as their only means of transportation. Unless a situation smelled of danger, I always went to the door. This passenger might be someone who needs my assistance, I reasoned to myself.

So I walked to the door and knocked. 'Just a minute,' answered a frail, elderly voice. I could hear something being dragged across the floor. After a long pause, the door opened. A small woman in her 90's stood before me. She was wearing a print dress and a pillbox hat with a veil pinned on it, like somebody out of a 1940s movie. By her side was a small nylon suitcase.

The apartment looked as if no one had lived in it for years. All the furniture was covered with sheets. There were no clocks on the walls, no knick-knacks or utensils on the counters. In the corner was a cardboard box filled with photos and glassware. 'Would you carry my bag out to the car?' she said. I took the suitcase to the cab, then returned to assist the woman.

She took my arm and we walked slowly toward the curb. She kept thanking me for my kindness. 'It's nothing,' I told her. 'I just try to treat my passengers the way I would want my mother treated.' 'Oh, you're such a good boy,' she said. When we got in the cab, she gave me an address, and then asked, 'Could you drive through downtown?' 'It's not the shortest way,' I answered quickly. 'Oh, I don't mind,' she said. 'I'm in no hurry. I'm on my way to a hospice.'

I looked in the rear-view mirror. Her eyes were glistening. 'I don't have any family left,' she continued. 'The doctor says I don't have very long.' I quietly reached over and shut off the meter. 'What route would you like me to take?' I asked.

For the next two hours, we drove through the city. She showed me the building where she had once worked as an elevator operator. We drove through the neighborhood where she and her husband had lived when they were newlyweds. She had me pull up in front of a furniture warehouse that had once been a ballroom where she had gone dancing as a girl. Sometimes she'd ask me to slow in front of a particular building or corner and would sit staring into the darkness, saying nothing.

As the first hint of sun was creasing the horizon, she suddenly said, 'I'm tired. Let's go now.' We drove in silence to the address she had given me. It was a low building, like a small convalescent home, with a driveway that passed under a portico.

Two orderlies came out to the cab as soon as we pulled up. They were solicitous and intent, watching her every move. They must have been expecting her. I opened the trunk and took the small suitcase to the door. The woman was already seated in a wheelchair.

'How much do I owe you?' she asked, reaching into her purse. 'Nothing,' I said. 'You have to make a living,' she answered. 'There are other passengers,' I responded. Almost without thinking, I bent and gave her a hug. She held onto me tightly. 'You gave an old woman a little moment of joy,' she said. 'Thank you.'

I squeezed her hand, and then walked into the dim morning light. Behind me, a door shut. It was the sound of the closing of a life. I didn't pick up any more passengers that shift. I drove aimlessly, lost in thought. For the rest of that day, I could hardly talk.

What if that woman had gotten an angry driver, or one who was impatient to end his shift? What if I had refused to take the run, or had honked once, then driven away? On a quick review, I don't think that I have done anything more important in my life. We're conditioned to think that our lives revolve around great moments. But great moments often catch us unaware, beautifully wrapped in what others may consider a small one.

*(Author unknown)*

*The stories in this chapter and others are available from [universal-spirituality.net/  
divine-plan-of-salvation/love-in-action/](http://universal-spirituality.net/divine-plan-of-salvation/love-in-action/)*



### *Chapter Seven*

## ***Presence Of Things Beyond Flesh***

*Drew Lanham*

Lecturing has always come easily to me. Backed by the technical, the theoretical, a few supporting slides, and a captive audience of college students or peers, I've given hundreds of presentations in classrooms and professional meetings. But after many years of stale introductions, methods, results, and conclusions, I began to wonder if

anyone was listening—and if there was real reason for them to.

In lecture after lecture I regurgitated factoids and data that were readily available in the readings. And between the slides of animals on the verge of extinction and of tropical rainforests being slashed, burned, and mowed down by cattle, I sounded to my own ears like the apocalyptic preachers. I looked into my audience and saw drawn expressions of boredom and dread. Day after day, semester after semester, year after year, I droned on. Yes, I was presenting the facts. Yes, I was publishing the facts. But it seemed to me that the facts never created motivation to make things better. [...]

A few years later, I spent several springs in northern Vermont, writing and thinking about nature in a different way. In that strange place my right brain flickered back on. The need to impress other professors, pile up peer-reviewed publications, and cache grant dollars began to give way to a desire for consciousness. Vermont was the greenest place I'd ever been. It was also a place where no one knew me. In that freedom my stress-tightened shoulders dropped and the tension in my jaw lessened. I slowed down and walked dirt roads—sometimes barefoot and empty minded, with not much more in my head than the present moment. Warbling vireos and least flycatchers were the only audiences I entertained.

Within the past couple of years I've given fewer and fewer (statistics-driven) presentations. More and more I find myself taking the hard data and wrapping it in genuine caring. The words are flocks of inspiration that I want to migrate from my mouth into the heads and hearts of others. I shake hands less now and give hugs more. I exchange more heartbeats than business cards. The energy is palpable.

In my moments of confession in front of strangers, talking about my love of something much greater than any

one of us, I become a freer me. Each time I am reborn. For all those years of running from anything resembling religion and all the scientific training that tells me to doubt anything outside of the prescribed (statistical) limits, I find myself defined these days more by what I cannot see than by what I can. As I wander into the predawn dark of an autumn wood, I feel the presence of things beyond flesh, bone, and blood. My being expands to fit the limitlessness of the wild world. My senses flush to full and my heartbeat quickens with the knowledge that I am not alone.

*The ornithologist Drew Lanham is lyrical  
in the languages of science, humans, and birds.*

*Excerpt above from his celebrated book,  
The Home Place: Memoirs of a Colored Man's  
Love Affair with Nature.*

Audio and translations available at:  
[awakin.org/v2/read/view.php?tid=2597](http://awakin.org/v2/read/view.php?tid=2597)



## *Chapter Eight*

# ***Parker Palmer Is Living the Questions***

*Interview by Nathan Scolaro*

*Nathan Scolaro on Parker Palmer:*

*When Parker Palmer's first grandchild was born, he saw something in her that he says he missed in his own children some 25 years earlier.*

*Looking up at him with those bright, curious eyes, she was completely herself, an embodiment of wholeness, already embedded with her birthright knowledge of who she was, why she was here and how she would relate to others. "We may abandon that knowledge as the years go by," Parker says. "But it never abandons us."*

*So much of Parker's teaching, writing and speaking over the decades has sought to understand and help people re-connect with this elusive, yet deeply powerful life-force that is the "self." Each of us, he believes, has an inner teacher that guides us towards our purpose—that shows us the best use of our gifts. But the modern world has been good at silencing that teacher, asking us to instead focus on things such as climbing the corporate ladder, knowing every answer in a science exam and having perfectly-toned bodies. We end*

*up living what he calls “divided lives,” far removed from the truth we hold within.*

*Parker’s learnings stem from his experiences. In his late twenties, on track to becoming a professor in sociology, he found himself deeply challenged by his ambitions and decided to move with his young family to a Quaker community that practised radical economic equality. They stayed there for more than a decade, but Parker’s internal battle with all the “oughts and should dos” of the world that shaped him saw him plummet into severe depression. Writing helped Parker make meaning of these difficult times and proved healing not only for him but for tens of thousands of readers around the world as well.*

*During his time in the Quaker community, Parker also came to see that while the inner world must be examined, keeping those reflections inside us can lead to narcissism, and so we need action and community as well as introspection and solitude in order for the “self” to thrive. It was this understanding that led him to establish the Center for Courage & Renewal, a non-profit organisation that runs workshops and retreats to help people find the clarity in community to lead more authentic and resilient lives.*

*At 76, Parker speaks with the gentle knowingness of a true elder. His joy for the world reverberates as deeply as his awareness of its capacity to cause pain. As we talk I am keenly aware of his message that when we acknowledge all the pieces that make us, even the broken ones, we will start to see our purpose in his world more clearly.*

**Nathan Scolaro:** *Your writing and speaking over the years has covered so much ground: leadership, education, spirituality, community, democracy. What do you think has been the common denominator in all of it?*

**Parker J. Palmer:** Well, it's probably this dance between the inner and the outer worlds that we keep doing whether we're teaching, leading, organising or simply being. I'm fascinated with the way our inner lives keep co-creating our external world—and how the external world then loops back to co-create us. The image I use is of the Möbius Strip, which is this very unusual 3D shape that only has one side. If you take a finger and trace what seems to be the outside surface, you suddenly find yourself on what seems to be the inside, and vice versa. So the inside and the outside continually flow into each other and co-create each other. The first time I saw this I thought, 'that's exactly how life is!'— whatever is inside of us flows out to help shape the outer world, and whatever is outside flows in to help shape our inner world.

*That's such a great metaphor.*

And I'm particularly fascinated with this in the context of a Western culture that's obsessed with externality, as if only the external world were important, or real or powerful. The obsession and commitment of a lot of Western culture—including Western education—is that what is real and powerful is outside of us. I've wanted to say in all my work, "Well, that's a half-truth, and we need to take the inner dimension with equal seriousness." If we don't, we're going to continue to screw things up.

*So what does the inner world bring to something like leadership and teaching?*

I think a leader or a teacher in a classroom—and teaching is a form of leadership—create environments in which other people must live and move and be. And as a leader, if you're not reflective about your inner life—if you're not in touch with not only all that is true and beautiful in you, but also all that's shadow in you, all that's suspect and dubious—then

inevitably you're going to create an environment for other people that has at least as much shadow as light, maybe more.

*Right, the people around you feel uneasy, maybe a bit distrusting.*

Yes. And teachers who only focus on the outer world will stand at the front of a classroom acting as if they have all the knowledge, all the wisdom, all the insight—and their task is to download that to students who are empty vessels and have no knowledge, wisdom and insight of their own. That is of course a terribly mistaken way to teach—the research shows that students don't learn well under those circumstances. They learn best from teachers who are able to intersect what they know and what the subject is about with the students' knowledge and insight and engagement with the world. This way we value what's inside everyone.

The student is not an empty vessel, but a human being with experience and knowledge that can be brought into the teaching and learning equation with great benefit to everyone.

You don't have to be a spiritual person in terms of the world's great religious traditions to get on board with what I'm saying about the inner life. All you need is Socrates, who said the unexamined life is not worth living. And on that I often say, "but if you choose to live an unexamined life, please do not take a job that involves other people, because you're going to do great damage" [laughs].

*You write a lot about living a divided life—living this division between who we are inside and who we are outside. I wanted to know when you first encountered that in your own life. And maybe how you've sought to bring the two together.*

Well, before I go way back to the Stone Age [laughs], I want to say that this quest for wholeness—for congruence between one's inner and outer life—never really ends. It's not a place you get to.

It's really a matter of asking the right questions, wrapping your life around them, and living into them. Rilke says if you do that, then in some distant day you might find you have lived yourself into an answer—but not an answer that can be put into words. So for me, I think I began to get my first clues about living a divided life when I was in college or graduate school.

*You were studying sociology?*

In college I studied sociology and philosophy, and then at Berkeley I did a PhD in sociology focusing on religion's role in social change. I was the first person in my family to go to college, and perhaps that was part of why I felt divided in an academic environment. Even though I was very successful by external measures—awards and fellowships and so forth—inwardly I felt like I didn't belong. For a long time I thought there was something wrong with me. I thought it was a lack of self-confidence. It took me a long time to realise that academia was not my vocation.

I finished my PhD at Berkeley in the late '60s. I'd spent five years preparing to become a professor. But instead, in 1969, I moved to Washington, DC to become a community organiser working on issues of racial justice and communal harmony. I was driven partly by the fact that the '60s in this country was a time of great turmoil—the racial crisis was deep and profound, as it still is. The war in Vietnam was going on. The cities were burning. And I felt very deeply that my calling was to use my sociology on the streets. That was a step towards bringing my inner life into more congruence with my outer life.

*Right.*

I spent five years as a community organiser, but I started to feel like a fraud—I was trying to lead people towards something I'd never fully experienced, which was community. I think fraudulence is often a symptom of the divided life: If

anyone ever found out what was going on inside of me, they'd kick me out [laughs].

*So you didn't have an experience of community growing up?*

I grew up in a typical affluent white suburb where good old American individualism dominated rather than community in any deeply meaningful form. So after five years of community organising, I did another out-of-the-box thing: I took a one-year sabbatical and moved to an intentional community, a Quaker community called *Pendle Hill*, which was an adult study centre organised like a kibbutz, an ashram or a monastery—but a monastery where sex was ok [laughs].

*Wow. What was that transition like? That's a huge thing to do.*

It was deeply challenging, partly because of the economics involved. I had been making a normal salary, but when I went to Pendle Hill in 1975, everyone on staff made the same amount. It didn't matter that I was dean of studies, had a PhD from Berkeley, that I was 35 and married with three kids. I made \$2400 a year plus room and board, which was the same as what an 18-year-old who came to work in the kitchen or garden made—someone who was there simply because they didn't know what to do next and needed a year to think it through after high school.

So there was this principle of radical economic equality which I really believed in, but which was hard to live by for a 35-year-old guy with three kids who had career aspirations and all kinds of assumptions about his obligations to his family. What was I doing to my career? Was I falling off the radar? Why wasn't I rising in the ranks of anything? I was haunted by these questions. Friends and family would ask me, "What the hell are you doing?" And I'd say, "I really can't explain it in

terms that even I understand. All I can tell you is, ‘I can’t not do it.’”

*It was a calling.*

Right. And today when I talk to younger people about vocation or calling, I eventually ask them, “Is this something you can’t not do?” Maybe it seems too risky or you don’t understand why you’re drawn to it. But if it’s something you can’t not do, that’s a pretty good sign you need to do it, no matter how it looks to other people.

*Yeah! And I find I don’t know where it’s coming from—this “can’t not do.” It’s subconscious. Which makes it really hard to explain, to make people see it’s the right thing for you.*

I think you’re right that it comes from the unconscious, from some mysterious place in ourselves. And I think if you’re wise, you have to honour that place. You can’t always get out the calculator and add up your reasons. Life doesn’t play itself out like a mathematical formula. We are not machines, we are organisms that have tropisms like plants—we are drawn towards certain things. A plant can’t tell you why it keeps reaching towards the sun every morning, but it does. And each of us responds to a different kind of light and moves in that direction at a cellular level and at an inarticulate level.

*It makes me think of your book, Let Your Life Speak, and the point you make—that the question is not so much “what are you trying to do with your life?” but rather “what is your life trying to do with you?”*

Yes, and oddly enough—this is a new thought I’m having as we speak—in some ways “let your life speak” is a way of saying “don’t always imagine you can put it into words—your life, your actions, your choices, your tropisms.” Decipher them, interpret them, try to figure out what they’re saying in action, because it ain’t going to come in words.

*So how long did you live in the Quaker community?*

It ended up being a total of 11 years. I was there for one year as an adult student and stayed on for 10 more years as dean of studies and writer-in-residence.

*And how was it for your wife and children? Was this a sacrifice they had to make for you?*

Not really. My wife was as eager as I was for an experience of community and an opportunity to pursue her vocation as a craftsperson. She'd spent the previous seven years as a stay-at-home mum, and shortly after I became dean of studies, Pendle Hill hired her to head up their arts and crafts program. This not only gave her a chance to work as a potter and weaver, but to discover her own gift for teaching, a vocation she pursued until she retired a few years ago.

As for our three children—who are, of course, three quite different people (among other things, two of them are adopted)—the best generalisation I can make is about their experience at Pendle Hill prior to and after hitting their teenage years. When they were young, my kids loved the place—it was full of “grandmothers,” “grandfathers”, “uncles” and “aunts” who loved them and did kind things for them. But once they got into their teenage years, their friends began wondering about this weird “hippie commune” where we lived.

*Where was it?*

It was set on 20 acres in the middle of a very conventional Philadelphia suburb.

*Ha!*

And so to varying degrees my children, as teenagers, found themselves embarrassed by the alternative lifestyle we were living. Then, when they got to college, things changed again. Suddenly it became “cool” to live the way we lived at

Pendle Hill. When they hit their thirties one of my kids said to me, “Pendle Hill gave me the gift of knowing that there is more than one way to live your life. I might not choose to go that way myself, but it’s important to know that I can make lifestyle choices, something a lot of my contemporaries don’t seem to understand.”

*And how do you personally reflect on that period of your life?*

For me, it was a critical decade for several reasons. One is that during my time as a community organiser, I found myself grieving the loss of my teaching role, because I had always thought of myself as being called to be a teacher. But at some point I realised that as an organiser I was still a teacher—I just had different students in a different classroom. I realised whatever role I played I would always be a teacher. At Pendle Hill I had an opportunity to be a teacher in a way that was outside the box of conventional academia. The students who came ranged in age from 18 to 88. They came because they were at some sort of turning point in their lives. They didn’t come for a degree or grades—we didn’t offer those things. It was education for the sake of the soul, for the mind, the heart, the whole person.

So as dean of studies I had the opportunity to learn and practice a new way to teach. I wasn’t constrained by academic protocols. I had a chance to invent for myself a pedagogy of teaching and learning that I have found enormously satisfying. And it’s the same pedagogy we practise at the *Center for Courage & Renewal*, the non-profit I founded 25 years ago.

The second thing that happened to me in my 10 years at Pendle Hill was in some ways even more fundamental in the shaping of my life. I mean, look at me: a white, middle-class, well-educated, straight male who lives in a society that is made to work for people like me. So people like me have a sense of entitlement that is very toxic to other people—and I think

ultimately toxic to ourselves. We have this sense that we're set apart, special, that the normal rules of life don't apply. Living for a decade in a society of radical economic equality rammed away at my sense of entitlement in ways that helped me come back to health and wholeness and sanity. Because that entitlement stuff is insane. It's batshit crazy!

[*Laughs]. So it let you plant your feet in the ground.*

Exactly. It was a lot about grounding. It was a life that brought me from "elevations" of various sorts down to the ground, and for that I'm ever-grateful. Today when I talk to younger people about vocation or calling, I eventually ask them, "Is this something you can't not do?"

*Tell me about this philosophy of teaching you developed at Pendle Hill and how it's informed your work at the Center for Courage & Renewal.*

Right. So the Quaker tradition, which has been foundational for me, holds a paradox that I find very powerful. On the one hand it says there is within each person a voice of authority, of truth, an inner teacher. Every person has that. There's no ultimate reference outside of yourself in the form of a pope or an expert. It's not that Quakers don't respect expertise. But in critical moments of life, when your identity and integrity are at stake, when your wellbeing is the central question, the ultimate authority is inside you. That's one pole of the paradox.

The other pole is that not all the voices inside us are voices of truth. We also have voices of ego, of fear, greed, jealousy, et cetera. So it's vital to test what you regard as truth, to sort and sift that truth in community. That's how science has worked from the beginning. Someone comes up with an insight, then you test it in a community of people who are engaged with the same subject. Nobody has the final word, but bit by bit knowledge evolves and brings us a little closer to the mark.

The Quakers hold this paradox of going inward and outward to find a truth. The Nobel Prize-winning physicist Niels Bohr once offered a wonderful definition of paradox. He said, “The opposite of an ordinary fact is a lie, but the opposite of one great truth may be another great truth.” I love that. A quick example: are we made for solitude? Absolutely. We’re all going to die alone so we better get accustomed to our solitary condition. Are we made for community? Absolutely. We can’t do without it!

*Yes! Ah, so true.*

Right? One great truth plus another great truth as “opposites” that are actually complementary. That’s paradox. So my teaching approach is really very simple: as a teacher you pose a question, then facilitate a process in which individuals can go deep into their experiences with that question, then create processes where they explore all that with each other. We call these Circles of Trust. They’re about people telling you—from their own truths—what they see, what they don’t see, what they feel fairly certain about, what they feel doubtful about. Out of that process, truth emerges as the complex thing it is. I have a definition of truth that has served me well over the years: “Truth is an eternal conversation about things that matter conducted with passion and discipline.”

Every piece of that is important. If you’re talking about things that don’t matter, it’s not going to take you to truth. If you’re talking without passion, that means you’re not deeply invested enough to get anywhere near truth. If you’re talking without discipline it means it’s chaos, random, so truth eludes you.

*And then if you believe there’s an endpoint to your truth you’re never going to really arrive.*

“You’re never going to really arrive.” For me, that’s precisely right. The “truth” has to be in the process rather than

in the conclusions, because in every field I know anything about, from theology to physics, the conclusions keep changing. You want to live in truth? Then you have to live in the conversation.

*That's exactly it.*

So my beef with traditional academia is that it teaches a lot of conclusions and sends people out as conclusion-repeaters, rather than as people who know how to live in the eternal conversation, who have the skill of being in community with their own voices and yet attentive to the voices of others. The Circles of Trust we conduct through the Center for Courage & Renewal teach people how to do this dance of inward journeying regarding things that matter to them, a dance held in community where sorting and sifting goes on. So it's not a community that says, "You're wrong, we're right." It's a community that helps individuals see truth in a larger and brighter light.

*And the Center for Courage & Renewal is running programs in many parts of the world now?*

Yes, across the States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, in the UK and South Korea. They usually take place in a retreat environment where we facilitate these Circles of Trust with groups of 20 or 30 people. Some have a focus on leadership, others on vocation, others on finding wholeness in your life and work.

*I imagine these Circles of Trust would be important for addressing the darkness in our inner worlds in particular. Which is something I wanted to talk to you about. I know you've been open about your experiences of depression in the past, and if you're comfortable sharing, I'd like to know what those times were like for you and maybe what kind of role community played in them?*

Thank you for the question. It's something I want to talk about, because so many people suffer from depression, and we double down on their suffering when we don't talk about it. I've made three deep dives into clinical depression—twice in my forties and once in my sixties. During each of those episodes I would wonder repeatedly, *Is this the day to end it all?* because the darkness was so deep. One of the ways I make meaning out of what would otherwise be a nihilistic experience is to talk about it. I hope it helps people who are in it see that there is life on the other side. In the depths of clinical depression, it's not like you're lost in the dark, it's like you've become the dark. I'm eager for people to understand that.

Normally when we have a feeling that's difficult to hold, we have the capacity to step back and look at ourselves and say, "I see what's going on, I see why I'm so devastated. I can see enough light to find a pathway out of this." But when you can't step back and say, "Oh, I see I'm in depression again, and the voice I'm hearing is not mine but the voice of depression"—when you can't do that because you have become the dark, the sense of annihilation is just overwhelming. I hear people say, "I don't understand why so and so committed suicide." Well I understand perfectly. The whole experience is exhausting and annihilating and that person needed the rest.

*[Silence].*

A very simple answer as to why people commit suicide. What I don't understand is why and how some people come through to the other side, how they find new life as they emerge from the depths of that darkness.

*That's the mystery for you?*

Yeah, it's powerfully mysterious. I've talked to psychiatrists about it and they've said, "There's a lot we don't understand about this and people who give you definitive answers about where it comes from and how to cure it don't

know what they're talking about." I was talking to a therapist just recently and said, "Do you believe it's true that most depressions eventually go away if the person can endure it?" And she said, "Yes, that's been my experience." I said, "Do you have any clues about how people endure it?" She said, "No," and I said, "Neither do I."

*Can you talk about what was going on in your life the first time you encountered depression?*

Yeah, and this would get us back to the whole discussion of the divided life. In my forties, my depression had partly to do with the fact that I was full of doubt about this "can't not do" stuff, full of anxiety about the path that I couldn't not be on. Was I fulfilling my responsibilities? Was I disappearing from the known world? Was I using my gifts in the best possible way? Those questions became so weighty for me that a kind of situational depression kicked in.

Here's the issue with diagnosing or understanding depression. Some are situational—if you're in an abusive relationship and something keeps you in it, you're going to get depressed. Some are bio-chemical and genetic—they run in families and have to do with what's in your DNA or brain chemistry. And the two interact in very subtle ways. So if you're in a situational depression you start losing sleep. Maybe you get radical insomnia. That's going to change your brain chemistry. Then your brain chemistry kicks in to worsen the situation because you can't think clearly, can't make good decisions. On the other hand, if your depression starts with DNA or brain chemistry, then you're going to be led into situational issues that come about because your thinking is skewed. It's enormously complicated.

*What did you need in that time? When you're deep in depression, when you've become the darkness as you say, what do you need?*

I'll give you a very grounded example of what people in depression need—and it comes back to your initial question about the role of community in this. People in depression need someone, at least one person, who is not afraid of them. Someone who doesn't treat depression as if it were a contagious disease, and who is willing to be present to them in the simplest possible ways.

I love to tell the story of a man who was this person during my first bout of depression at Pendle Hill. He asked my permission to do this, and when I said yes, he came to my house every afternoon at about four o'clock, sat me down on a chair, took my shoes and socks off and massaged my feet for about 30 minutes.

Bill was a very intuitive person. He didn't say many words. He just somehow knew that what I needed more than anything else was a connection to the human race—and he found the only place in my body where I could feel that connection, or feel anything: the soles of my feet. When you're in depression your body goes dead. Depression is not so much a feeling of sadness as it is the terrifying fact that you can feel nothing at all. Bill found a way to break through that. He wasn't afraid of me, and I knew he wasn't afraid of me. He was simply with me, present to me, and he kept my connection to humanity alive during a deadly time.

A depressed person is in some ways dying, or parts of that person are dying, and there were parts of me that died off in depression—stuff that needed to die off: ego stuff, intellectual stuff, all the “oughts” and “shoulds.” That's another example of being pulled from dangerous elevations to the ground. A therapist once said to me, “Parker, you seem to treat depression as the hand of an enemy trying to crush you. Would it be possible to imagine it as the hand of a friend pressing you down to ground on which it's safe to stand?”

*How powerful. Wow.*

That image didn't fix things right away, but over time it became powerfully helpful to me. Being with a depressed person is like sitting at the bedside of a dying person. When you do that you realise two things. First, you don't have a fix for this problem, so don't even try. Second, it would be profoundly disrespectful to avert your eyes or leave the room because you can't bear the sight. What the dying person needs is simple companionship. That's what this friend at Pendle Hill gave me. He was a lifeline.

*Just by being present. That's so true. Because so often we try to make a positive thing out of tough situations.*

Yes. A lot of people who came my way said, "Parker, why are you so depressed? You're such a good guy. Your writing and speaking and teaching have helped so many. And I just felt like I'd defrauded another person. Others would say, "It's a beautiful day out, why don't you soak up the sunshine, enjoy the flowers?" That depressed me further because I knew intellectually it was a beautiful day but there was not an atom in my body that could feel the beauty.

*What was it like for you on the other side of depression?*

I think for me one of the first signs of coming out of depression was that my sense of humour returned. But ultimately, the only image I've ever been able to come up with is that when I came out of depression I felt more at home in my own skin. That's been true every time.

*And what does that mean for you, to feel at home in your skin?*

For me it means embracing all that I am. Wholeness does not mean perfection. It means embracing brokenness as an integral part of my life. It's also about self-forgiveness, not taking myself so seriously, being able to smile and say, "There you go again Parker! It's okay to screw up." In the larger world,

feeling at home means extending that same grace to other people. And more than anything else, feeling at home means relishing the diversity of life on earth and enjoying—profoundly appreciating—the little things. I often get up early to write, and these days I never fail to take time to observe the sunrise because it's such a great thing to see. I spent many years so eager to get in front of the computer to start writing that I failed to see sunrises. That doesn't happen any more.

*Where do you have your best thoughts?*

My first response is, “At inconvenient times!” When I have to say to people, “Excuse me, I have to go write this down.” I also have them walking in the woods. I live in a place where there’s lots of natural beauty, water and woods, and I like to do a lot of walking. I also have them in the process of writing. So for me, writing is not about having a bunch of thoughts lined up and then committing them to paper. It’s starting to think with my fingers on the keyboard and finding out what’s in there as I write.

*I wanted to talk about the words you use when you write, words like “compassion” and “kindness” and “love.” They’re words that have been watered down a lot in our culture. But when I read them in your work I feel their weight. How do you use them the way you do?*

Well, I try to never use those words in a cheerleading way: “Let’s go out there and love.” “Let’s go out there and be compassionate.” “Kindness is the way.” I try to use language in a way that reflects the shadow as well as the light. If I find myself writing a lyrical passage on how wonderful life is, there’s something in me that says, “Remember the days you wanted to take your own life,” and let some of that come onto the page as well. The response I get from people is: “Thank you for being honest about the entirety of life, and for not over-emphasising one side or the other. You don’t go to gloom and

doom, but neither do you go to, ‘Ain’t everything great.’” It’s very interesting to me what happens when you frame things with a kind of honesty that some people might regard as too dark, but a lot of people experience as affirming and encouraging.

What’s most important for me is that I am faithful to my own gifts, faithful to what I perceive as the needs of the world, and faithful to the points where my gifts intersect with those needs in some way that I have something to offer. If on the day I die I can say, “To the best of my ability—cutting myself some slack for my human flaws and fallibilities—I was faithful to my gifts, to the world’s needs as I saw them,” then I can take my final breath with a feeling of satisfaction that I showed up on earth with what I had and offered it up to the world.

*Beautiful. What are you still learning at this stage of your life? At 76? What are you learning from the generations coming through?*

Well, at the Center for Courage & Renewal we’ve been reaching out in very systematic ways to the under-40 generation. And it’s been one of the most exciting engagements we’ve had, certainly for me. Four years ago, we gathered a group of young people here at our house to talk, in part, about the best uses of digital technology in our work, because folks in my generation aren’t up to speed with that. On the second day of our gathering, I was learning so much—I mean, it took me beyond Facebook so I can even Skype with you now, Nathan!

*Ah yeah, look at you go!*

[Laughs] So I said to these young people, “I have an image I want to share. At age 72, I feel like I’m standing somewhere down the curvature of the earth where I can’t see the same horizon that you can see from where you stand closer to the top. But that same horizon is coming at me whether I know it or not. As long as I’m alive I have to deal with stuff that

I can't see but that's coming at me. So I need your eyes and ears. I need you to tell me what it is you're seeing and hearing because I want to engage the world that's on its way. And I want to help give shape to it on the Möbius Strip." And I remember adding, "Incidentally, I need you to speak loudly and distinctly because we older people can be hard of hearing!" [Laughs].

[Laughs]

And these younger folks very kindly said, "Well, we need what you have to offer, which is this filtered experience of some of the things we're dealing with now." So it became this wonderful generative exchange. The parts of this rising generation that I interact with give me great hope. They don't trust existing institutions any more than I do. But instead of just walking away, they're inventing new institutional forms, new ways of doing things—some of which are digital, some of which are face-to-face. They're creating a new world that isn't dependent on these rapidly failing institutions of ours. I see that in religion, education, even politics—which in this country is a very sticky wicket.

*Ours too. Very sticky. And you know, I was talking with a friend the other day, and here in Australia we have an issue with our government trying to stop funding to Aboriginal communities. Which is devastating. We were talking about this and my friend said, "The question we're faced with," at least in middle-class Australia, "is not 'How do we live?' but 'How do we heal?'" And it made me think of you because "healing" is a word you use a lot in relation to politics and democracy.*

Yes. And you know before I speak to that, you asked earlier about language. Sometimes I think about book titles in the way I wouldn't normally have. So when I write a book called *Healing the Heart of Democracy* there's hope in that but there is also recognition that something is wounded, right?

*Sure, yeah.*

So there's the darkness and the light right there. Or The Courage to Teach, another book title, that says, "Teaching ain't an easy gig. It really takes courage." And I think a lot of teachers responded to that book simply because of the title and what those words invoke.

But to go back to your point. What "healing the heart of democracy" means to me, in our context—and I can only speak to that context because I just don't know enough about other systems—is reclaiming people power. And that means talking across the lines that divide us. I've often said in regards to civic society: "It's more important to be in right relationship than it is to be right." And the reason for that is, if you're not in right relationship, you can't sustain these long complex debates about very challenging questions in a way that might eventually take you to some conception of the common good. If you've just got to be right, it's gonna last about 15 minutes and you're just going to say, "Screw it, we're both out of here." But if you're in right relationship you can continue that dialogue. What I like to say is, "Yes we need civil discourse in order to progress," but civil discourse means a lot more than just watching our tongues or minding our manners. It means valuing our differences. And realising that it's out of the play of differences that we get closer to a larger truth.

What's most important for me is that I am faithful to my own gifts, faithful to what I perceive as the needs of the world, and faithful to the points where my gifts intersect with those needs in some way that I have something to offer.

*Who would you say has been your greatest teacher?*

My dad had an enormous influence on me. He grew up in a blue-collar family in Waterloo, Iowa. During the Great Depression, he went to Chicago—"the big city"—in search of work, carrying only a high school diploma, and rose over the

next 50 years to become owner and CEO of the company that had hired him as a temporary bookkeeper in the early 1930s. He was a very successful businessman, but he had an amazing ability to avoid telling me what to do about the issues in my young life. Instead, he asked me honest, open questions that evoked that inner teacher. He never laid particular expectations on me, as in, “I want you to do X, Y or Z with your life”—but he surrounded me with a kind of energy field of expectancy that made me feel confident that I grow from the inside out, in my own direction, toward my own tropisms.

At the same time, Dad surrounded me with an unconditional love that made it safe for me to risk failing, the downside that always comes with the territory called “growing”! I did not have to succeed to earn his love.

I have no doubt this is why I’ve had a basic trust in life from early on that has made it possible for me to risk, grow, fail and repeat that cycle again and again. I think the Circle of Trust model is basically an extension of the “safe space” Dad created for me as I was growing up—a space full of expectancy and unconditional regard where people can and do take the risk of growing while being rooted in what is deepest in them.

*Nathan Scolaro creates content for Small Giants Academy, producing the Dumbo Feather Podcast, contributing to the magazine and hosting their Storytelling workshops. He is passionate about the role language and stories play in shaping who we are and how we live. Previously the editor of Dumbo Feather magazine for 8 years he enjoys shining a light on ideas and work that help bring about a more beautiful world*

*This conversation reprinted from Dumbo Feather magazine.  
It is available online at [dumbofeather.com/conversations/parker-palmer-is-living-the-questions](http://dumbofeather.com/conversations/parker-palmer-is-living-the-questions)*

*Parker Palmer's Center for Courage and Renewal offers programs, resources, and connections to help renew your courageous spirit, amplify your inner teacher, and cultivate the stamina to keep showing up for yourself, others, and the causes you care about. Additional information is available at [courage-renewal.org](http://courage-renewal.org)*

*Carrie Newcomer, a dear longtime friend of Parker, has joined with him on several projects including The Growing Edge collaboration which explores growing edges, personally, vocationally and politically. Together they create live events, personal growth retreats, and the highly rated The Growing Edge Podcast that features authors, activists, poets and musicians. Spirituality and Health Magazine named Parker & Carrie in the top ten spiritual leaders for the next 20 years. She has also presented workshops with ServiceSpace.org, an international interfaith community for creating positive change through personal and collective service experiences.*

*Parker and Carrie's shared The Growing Edge website is [newcomerpalmer.com](http://newcomerpalmer.com), which also includes their podcasts.*

## *Chapter Nine*

# *Being Nice Isn't The Same As Being Kind*

*Donna Cameron*

Kind people go beyond what's expected of them. They go beyond the easy response to offer the best of who they are. They do it without expectation of something in return. They do it because of who and what they are and their vision of the world they want to live in.

Most people would tell you I am a nice person. I was raised to be nice. "Be nice" was my mother's frequent mantra.... My mother, while generally nice, was not especially kind. Nice allowed her to keep her distance from most people and avoid connecting or interacting at more than a superficial level. She was almost always civil, but effort and warmth were generally absent for all but the closest friends or relatives, and sometimes even then her kindness was restrained. A string of losses from early childhood on had taught her not to trust or hope for too much, or to set her sights too high. She lived with a deep regard for safety and a persistent fear of more loss. With my mother as my model, I learned to be cautious, reserved, and nice.

But some years ago, I realized that wasn't enough. I wanted to be more than nice. I wanted to abandon lingering

fears and set my sights high. I wanted to be kind. There's just something about kind people. By their actions, or sometimes by their mere presence, they make us feel good. They give us hope for the world. To me, being kind meant knowing at the end of each day that I had helped, that I was offering the best of who I am, and that I had perhaps made a difference. And it also meant spending less time looking for threats or failings and more time recognizing abundance and compassion. I saw that my life would matter if, at its end, people said of me, "She was a kind person." I could think of no greater eulogy. So I aspired to be kind, and frequently I was. But just as often, I was impatient, I was snarky, I was judgmental, I was indifferent or simply oblivious.

Being kind—truly kind—is hard. Nice requires little effort. I can be nice while also being indifferent, critical, and even sarcastic. But I can't be kind and be any of those things. Being kind means caring. It means making an effort. It means thinking about the impact I'm having in an interaction with someone and endeavoring to make it rich and meaningful—giving them what they need at that exact moment, without worrying about whether I get anything in return. It means letting go of my judgments and accepting people as they are. Kindness requires me to do something my upbringing discouraged—it demands that I reach out and that I take a risk.

Nice doesn't ask too much of us. It isn't all that hard to be nice; in fact, it's easy. It's also benign. Passive. Safe. One can be nice without expending too much energy or investing too much of oneself in others. One can be nice without taking risks. Nice is holding the door, smiling at the cashier; nice may even be dropping a couple of dollars in a homeless person's hand if we do so without looking him in the eye and saying a genuinely caring word. Kind is asking how we can help, offering our hand, jumping in without being asked, and

engaging in conversation that goes beyond the superficial. All of these actions have an element of risk: we might be rebuffed, ignored, or disrespected.

Years ago, I had the pleasure of knowing Dr. Dale Turner, author, speaker, theologian, and extraordinarily kind man. He always carried with him and handed out little green cards with two simple words printed on them: “Extend Yourself.” I’ve carried that little card in my wallet and had those two words pinned beside my desk for nearly three decades. It seems to me that the phrase “Extend Yourself” captures the essence of kindness. It also highlights the difference between niceness and kindness.

A life of kindness is not something that I live only when it suits me. I’m not a kind person if I’m kind only when it’s easy or convenient. A life of kindness means being kind when it’s neither convenient nor easy—in fact, sometimes it might be terribly hard and tremendously inconvenient. That’s when it matters most. That’s when the need is greatest and transformation dances at the edge of possibility. That’s the time to take a deep breath and invite kindness to dance.

*After many deeply-satisfying years  
in non-profit management, Donna Cameron  
spends her time “pursuing unanswerable questions  
in good company (Rachel Remen).” Excerpt above  
from her book, A Year of Living Kindly  
From awakin.org/v2/read/view.php?tid=2604*



## *Chapter Ten*

# ***Reclaim Your Chicken***

*Jon Bernie*

Being does not require thought. Be fully attentive, gently attentive. Trust the natural ease of awareness. Make no effort. No trying, no doing, no defensiveness. Just gazing and seeing without resistance.

As you allow this natural openness, at some point it begins to gel. The Jell-O of awareness! One minute it's liquid, the next minute —bloop! It's kind of a little jiggly, but there it is: connectedness. When you're tuned in like that, there's empathy. There's no "your feelings" or "my feelings," just the movement of sensation.

This is what it means to understand profoundly—not personally—what responsibility really is: the realization that we are interwoven with everything and everyone.

As we cultivate this attentiveness, interconnectedness of being emerges. With it comes the natural letting go of the burden of always being in survival mode. Unfortunately, as you all know, we live in a world where survival mode is normal. That's the heart of why we are lost, hopeless, helpless, and in despair. We have lost touch with being; our true being.

But it is not lost. You are intimate with it. It is nourishing, loving, generous. Perceiving it fulfills us as human beings.

And so you can live naturally as who you are in the world, more in touch with your individual purpose, your contribution to the ecosystem of all being. You may not be able to articulate it, you may not understand it, but something deep within you completely trusts that movement is guiding you and guiding everything all of the time, because now you're in sync with it.

Awakening is being in sync.

Years ago, I used to say I was into the Teachings of the Chicken.

You've heard the expression, "you're like a chicken running around with your head cut off." Remember that? Well, I changed it to, "you're a head running around with your chicken cut off."

You have to reclaim your chicken!

There is such wonder in experiencing peace throughout your whole nervous system. Nothing to do, nowhere to go, no one to be. What a relief! Then we really see. This seeing is also feeling, listening, being, connection. A profound synesthesia.

At this stage of listening, very little instruction is required. If you're looking for more, notice that urge. Notice that insecurity without trying to fix it. Allow insecurity. What if insecurity—wow—was nothing wrong? This is just a natural rebalancing in process—this is just healing. Healing isn't necessarily getting rid of a condition. It could be. It's also balance, and harmony even with imperfection, and ultimately freedom.

*Jon Bernieis a contemporary, nondual spiritual teacher who offers a compassionate, heart-centered approach to awakening.*

## *Chapter Eleven*

# *Awakening to Life*

*By Jeremy Lent*

*“I am life that wills to live  
in the midst of life that wills to live”*  
*Albert Schweitzer*

There was a debate that fascinated theologians in Christian Europe for a millennium or so, engaging them as recently as the nineteenth century. It revolved around this imponderable: If you'd lived a righteous life and your soul ended up in heaven for eternity, how could you remain beatific if you knew a loved one was suffering eternal torment in hell? One theory was that God wiped your mind clean of memories of any loved ones now enduring perpetual torture. Other prominent theologians, amazingly, suggested that those in heavenly bliss would simply rejoice when they heard the “dolorous shrieks and cries” of the damned, knowing that they got their just deserts.

The bizarreness of this question arises from a paradox deeply ingrained in the Western tradition: the supposed impermeable essence of the human soul. For millennia, people were told that their soul—their true identity—was a

discrete eternal unit that was rewarded for a good life by permanent residence in heaven with God. Their bodily incarnation, with its complex desires and feelings for others, was a dangerous distraction tempting them from what really mattered. While the traditional Christian story of the soul might seem consigned mostly to history, it shares the same deep roots with our dominant neoliberal capitalist system, based upon the foundational idea of an individual as an autonomous agent utterly distinct from the rest of humanity.

There is a telling contrast to the Christian story of the soul's salvation in the Buddhist conception of the bodhisattva—someone who, having worked tirelessly to achieve enlightenment, has arrived at the threshold of nirvana with the opportunity to be released from persistent cycles of reincarnation. But rather than opting for liberation, the bodhisattva chooses to return to the world and work ceaselessly until all beings have awakened from needless suffering. This seems at first like an act of boundless altruism. However, a deeper analysis reveals something even more profound. The bodhisattva has achieved the realization that the boundaries separating the self from others are all mere constructions of a conditioned mind. In this “perfection of wisdom,” the bodhisattva recognizes her inherent interdependence with all sentient beings. She’s not sacrificing herself for the benefit of others—she has awakened to the realization that the very notion of a separate self is a falsehood.

Ultimately, our values arise from our identity. If someone defines themselves as an isolated individual, they will feel entitled to pursue their own happiness at the expense of others. Someone who identifies primarily with their nation will have no qualms about putting up barriers to prevent others from entering. If your identity is based on a fundamentalist religious creed, you may be ready to martyr

yourself for the cause. And if you identify primarily with all life, you're likely to devote your existence to work for the benefit of all sentient beings.

Our mainstream culture, forged in medieval Europe and rationalized by reductionist science from the seventeenth century onward, tells us to find our identity in separation, just like the Christian soul. Mainstream economists posit that humans are selfish, rational maximizers of individual welfare. Popularizers of outmoded scientific theories, such as Richard Dawkins, have successfully peddled the idea that we are machines driven by selfish genes, and any moral framework we construct must overpower our true nature “because we are born selfish.”

But that old worldview of separation has expired. It's not just dangerous, leading us to the precipice of ecological devastation and climate breakdown—it's plain wrong. Modern scientific findings from fields as diverse as systems theory, complexity science, cognitive anthropology, and evolutionary theory all point to the same fundamental insight that wisdom traditions such as Buddhism, Taoism, and Indigenous knowledge have been telling us for millennia: that our very existence arises from our interconnectedness—within ourselves, with each other, and with the living Earth.

We learn from complexity science that the relationships between things are frequently more important than the things themselves. Think of a photograph of yourself when you were a child. You know it's you, but virtually every cell within you now is different from what comprised that child—and even the cells that remain for life are constantly reconfiguring their internal contents, so you can be certain that not a single molecule in that little child is still part of you. And yet, you know you're the same person. You have the memories to prove it. It's the complex set of relationships between your different parts that retains the resiliency that

links your personhood to that child. The same principle holds true for virtually all natural systems: candle flames, rivers, and ecosystems.

Far from being separate from the rest of nature, we are part of an endless meshwork of life going back over billions of years. Biologists explain that as a result of deep homology, fruit flies share more than half their genes with humans, and even bananas share 44 percent. The rich diversity of life on Earth arose, not from the selfishness of those genes, but because different organisms learned how to cooperate with each other in a stunningly complex network of mutually beneficial symbiosis. And as humans evolved into a unique species, cooperation was their defining characteristic. Alone among primates, we developed moral emotions—such as compassion, shame, and a visceral sense of fairness—that caused our identity to expand beyond individual selves and incorporate our entire group.

While this pervasive interconnectedness may seem surprising to modern mainstream thinking, it's fundamental to the sense of identity that non-Western traditions foster. When members of the Native American Blackfoot tribe meet each other, they don't ask "How are you?" Instead, they ask "How are the connections?" Similarly, in Central and Southern Africa, a guiding principle for life is *ubuntu*, which is frequently translated as "I am because you are, you are because I am." In many Indigenous communities, the type of self-seeking behavior promoted by neoliberalism would be seen as a form of madness.

Traditional Chinese sages similarly based their moral compass on the foundation of the interrelatedness of all life, the realization of which they called *ren*. Philosopher Cheng Yi declared that a person who achieves the state of *ren* "regards heaven, earth, and all things as one body; there is nothing not himself." This understanding was unforgettably

expressed by Zhang Zai in one of the greatest expressions of human wisdom called the *Western Inscription*, which begins:

*Heaven is my father and earth is my mother,  
and I, a small child, find myself placed intimately  
between them.*

*What fills the universe I regard as my body;  
what directs the universe I regard as my nature.*

*All people are my brothers and sisters; all things are  
my companions.*

In the face of our civilization's onslaught against life, an increasing number of modern Western visionaries are beginning to throw off the mantle of separation that has muddied the moral clarity of mainstream society—what Einstein called “a kind of optical delusion of consciousness... a kind of prison for us”—and rediscover the core truth of our shared identity.

The founder of Deep Ecology, Arne Naess, called this expanded identity an ecological self. “We may be said to be in, and of, Nature,” he declared, “from the very beginning of our selves.” For the great humanitarian, Albert Schweitzer, who experienced his own identity as springing from life itself (as expressed in the epigraph) a system of values becomes self-evident: “I cannot but have reverence for all that is called life. I cannot avoid compassion for everything that is called life. That is the beginning and foundation of morality.”

Once we recognize that we *are* life, we are called by the overriding imperative to devote our own little eddy of sentience to the flourishing of all life, of which we are but one tiny part. With an expanded sense of identity, this becomes not so much a moral obligation as a natural instinct based on life's own drive for flourishing. An ecological worldview

leads naturally to acting out of love, which can simply be understood as the realization and embrace of connectedness. A deep recognition of interdependence can become a foundation for what Buddhist scholar David Loy calls “bodhisattva activism”—wherein each new situation presents an opportunity to re-orient from individual separateness toward a shared identity.

Part of becoming an ecological self is to find our participative role within a larger community of changemakers creating what George Monbiot calls the “new politics of belonging.” Just as trees in a healthy forest communicate with and fortify each other through their underground mycorrhizal network in a “wood-wide web,” each of us can be most effective in transformative change when we connect with the existing network of life-affirming groups already operating around us.

We have arrived at a stage in the human story on Earth where the decisions made over the next few decades will determine the future direction, not just of humanity, but of Earth itself. Ultimately, it will be a collective decision based on our shared sense of identity. While our civilization has been destroying much of life on Earth in the past few decades, we have also been developing a greater collective consciousness as a species than ever before. Can we wake up in time to appreciate our collective identity and participate in something greater than our fixed selves? As Thích Nhát Hanh has suggested, the next Buddha may not be in the form of an individual, but the awakening community.

A full recognition of interconnectedness brings with it myriad implications as we traverse its tapestry. Some pathways invite possibilities for the bliss of liberation from the confines of a bounded self. Other pathways open up grievous avenues of shared anguish as we become intimate with the suffering of others and the horrifying devastation of

nonhuman life on Earth unfolding before us. Awakening to life in this century of turmoil is far from a painless experience. It takes courage, authenticity, and the humility to reach out to others when the enormity of the loss becomes too unbearable to hold in your own heart. But taken together, pursuing these pathways of awakening can imbue our lives with vibrant meaning as we participate in regenerating the Earth, in setting humanity and nonhuman nature on a course for the Symbiocene—an indefinitely prolonged period of mutual flourishing.

*Jeremy Lent is author of The Patterning Instinct: A Cultural History of Humanity's Search for Meaning, which investigates how different cultures have made sense of the universe and how their underlying values have changed the course of history.*

*This article contains selected excerpts from Jeremy Lent's book, The Web of Meaning: Integrating Science and Traditional Wisdom to Find Our Place in the Universe.*

*Full article here:  
[kosmosjournal.org/kj\\_article/awakening-to-life](http://kosmosjournal.org/kj_article/awakening-to-life)*



## *Chapter Twelve*

# *With a Soft Breath: How My Daughter Rides Horses*

*By Greta Matos*

*(Though apparently not on-topic here, this story contrasts power-over and power-with; her discussion is about heart-relationships generally and not just human-with-horse.)*



I've begun to teach my 3.5 year old daughter to ride horses on her own.

Doing so has made me realize that for countless children who are taught the "traditional" way to ride horses, this rite of passage is (painfully) one of the

most normalized places where people teach children *power-over* rather than *power-with*. It's where adults normalize using force to get what you desire; where adults normalize using violence to get "respect;" where adults model overt violation

of personal space and complete ignorance or disdain for highly sensitive responsiveness.

I grew up with horses, and learned to ride alone at a similar age, and when I was a teenager I began teaching others to ride around the time I was training horses and working with traumatized and “problem horses.” Having grown up in the USA, I was surrounded by a lot of ways of being with horses that were fundamentally dominance-based, as I describe above, and built upon the need for power-over, because that was considered to be the only safe way to work with such a large and powerful animal. Even in the natural horsemanship space, which I studied for decades, many of the approaches still utilize power-over tactics to get the horse to do what the human wants.

It doesn’t actually have to be this way though. Horses are incredibly, incredibly intelligent and sensitive, and many are incredibly curious and enjoy authentic connection. Not all, mind you, and those horses should be respected in their lack of desire to partner with humans. They live in the world of highly attuned, energetic responsiveness, so they know and read the language of the body, emotions and intention with crystal clear accuracy. This means that with a good dose of self-awareness, authentic intention and embodied presence, you can communicate with them and ask them to do things with the use of absolutely zero force, just by using your body and your energy (engaged through your awareness and breath).

Being with them this way becomes a playful process of relationship building; every encounter is a dialogue where there is an exchange and where “no” is able to be felt and other options explored. When I ride, I prefer to ride with no saddle, no bridle, just my body and their body, and together we are conversing. It’s not the only way I ride, mind you, but by far my favorite way.

Living the way I've lived with our herd here in Southern Chile these last eight years, spending most of our time roaming across nearly wild landscapes together—as horses naturally do—I've unlearned nearly everything I was taught by very accomplished equestrians when I was growing up. The horses have taught me it was all wrong. Force and power-over were never necessary; they were mostly done to cover up the fear people felt when they themselves were afraid, insecure, or didn't trust themselves to make the right choice. Power-with is an option with them, always, but it requires that we release our agenda, our rigid pre-determined outcome, and instead, genuinely engage in the conversation with them. It is incredible what they show us when they feel our willingness to genuinely partner from the place of power-with.

Now, as I teach my daughter to ride, I am grounding her foundational learning in power-with, rather than power-over. How? First, relationship is the center and the focus. She doesn't associate the horse as something she uses—she acknowledges them as our kin. They are our relations, and we honor them as sentient beings. As such, we have made an effort to normalize that the horses are not just for riding; she is not entitled to ride them, they are not “her” horses, and most of the time that she spends with them we just spend “being” together, hanging in the field and wandering wherever the herd roams.

She has learned how to ask permission of a horse when she approaches. When we walk into the field, we feel the horses feel us, tracking the somatic cues arising in our bodies, drawing a map within her so that she remembers to move slowly, and take more breaths. She lets the horses smell her before she touches them, because she knows horses would never let something touch them that they hadn't first smelled.

(This is something most humans rarely allow a horse to do, immediately violating their space by touching them.)

We have a ritual of breath connection when she sits on top of the horse, where she closes her eyes and she takes deep breaths and she feels the horse breathing. She smells the horse, feels the mane, feels the ripples of the skin. We explore the whys of their body language, their snorts and whinnies and shakes and swishes. Curiosity is embeded in her shared language with them. She will not ever use a bit in a horse's mouth; she will learn to stop a horse with the weight of her body and her intention and voice cues. She will not learn to steer a horse until she understands the responsibility she has in her hands is to clearly communicate intention with her heart through her hands. She learns to move the horse forward with her intention, her focus and activating the energy in her body. She is not taught to kick to go. As we walk, she is encouraged to check in with the horse and ask if they are comfortable, if they are enjoying this experience.

Sometimes, she stops the ride to tell me something is bothering the horse, and we check together to find our way to whatever is uncomfortable and resolve it. She is learning how her body on top of the horse impacts the horse's ability to stay balanced, and what she can do to support the horse by keeping her body balanced in a grounded position. She says "thank you" when we finish; she asks if the horse wants a hug and moves into their chest to embrace their heart.

Perhaps most importantly, I am teaching her to work with her fear and the horse's fear, so that she isn't afraid of either of them and doesnt ever resort to power-over if either comes up. Some of this is being taught mainly through story, in the magical weavings of tales from my childhood and "what if" scenarios. But practical teachings are available as well, like learning what it feels like to fall, and the safest way to fall off of a horse; what fear feels like in her body and what

to do when she feels it (breathe!); how to feel the fear of a horse (and what to do when she feels that, again, breathe!), how to keep her body safe when a herd runs or a horse moves quickly, how to read body language so she understands when a horse says “no” or “go away.” As a foundation she is learning, again and again, the sanctuary of returning to her breath—that by slowing her breath she can support a nervous horse and her own nerves as well.

It is one of the most powerful tools we have with horses, our breath. It is so soft, but so are they, and in so many moments when a horse's power is on the verge of becoming a danger to another, we have the power to ground them with our breath, co-regulating to find our way back to neutral. I think when power-over is resorted to, it is often because power-with seems too frightening, unimaginable, or even too inconvenient (as awful as that is).

I see so many parallels between the power-over tactics that are used between adults and children and those used between humans and horses. As such, I've found myself adopting a lot of the non-violent communication approaches that I have embedded in my relationship with horses, in my relationship with my daughter (after all, I've been a horse woman much longer than I've been a mother). Both the horses and being a parent are teaching me again and again three vital options I have that allow me to move beyond the conditioning of power-over—go slower, return to your breath (and slow that down, too), and that you can choose a different way than you were taught/shown/had done to you.

To deeply integrate all I've been learning as I consciously peel off and discard the conditioned power-over approaches to so many ways of existing in our world, I've had to dive deep into my fears. I've had to learn what fear feels like in my body, and witness what my coping mechanisms are when my fear is triggered. I've also had to

trace backwards and inwards the threads that link my “power-over” behaviors to the core part of me seeking protection. I’ve had to learn about those parts of myself and nurture them in other ways to restore a sense of safety within myself, so that they are not reliant on the power-over tactics in order to feel safe—and when that feels authentically engaged, cut those old threads. There are many that I still cannot even see, so I might be cutting for a long time. I hope not, but some of these threads stretch back centuries through long ancestral lines. I am here, though, humbly, in this lifetime; and I’m aware of this inner work, and I am committed. I keep being gifted incredible knives and beautiful, magical tools made for cutting, so it clearly is part of my soul’s work.

I learn a little more everyday, as I dance in these spaces of power-with rather than power-over, especially that I can trust myself to not misuse my power when I choose, and I have to choose. And also, that I can trust the power of another when I learn the language of their fear. Then, as I do and am teaching my daughter to do with the horses, rather than meet that fear with resistance, I can meet it with a soft breath.

*Greta Matos grew up on a farm, where living in close relationship to horses was foundational in her life journey. Ten years ago, she left a successful career in corporate sustainability. Today, she is a guardian of horses, mother, and consultant based in Chile.*

*This piece was originally written as part of a Laddership Pod and can be found at [dailygood.org/story/3178/with-a-soft-breath-how-my-daughter-rides-horses-greta-matos/](https://dailygood.org/story/3178/with-a-soft-breath-how-my-daughter-rides-horses-greta-matos/)*

### *Interlude*

#### *A Quartet of Short “Instrument of Love” Stories*

## ***Love and Grace in the Midst of Tragedy***

I was walking around in a WalMart store, when I saw a cashier hand a little boy some money back. The boy couldn't have been more than 5 or 6 years old. The cashier said, "I'm sorry, but you don't have enough money to buy this doll."

The little boy turned to the old woman next to him, "Granny, are you sure I don't have enough money?" The old lady replied, "You know that you don't have enough money to buy this doll, my dear." Then she asked him to stay there for just five minutes while she went to look around. She left quickly.

The little boy kept holding the doll in his hand. I walked toward him and I asked who he wished to give this doll to. "It's the doll that my sister loved most and wanted so much for Christmas. She was sure that Santa Claus would bring it to her." I replied that maybe Santa Claus would bring it to her after all, and not to worry.

But he told me sadly. "No, Santa Claus can't bring it to her where she is now. I have to give the doll to my mommy so that she can give it to my sister when she goes there." His eyes were so sad while he continued: "My sister has gone to

be with God. Daddy says that mommy is going to see God very soon too, so I thought that she could take the doll with her to give it to my sister."

My heart nearly stopped. The little boy looked up at me and said, "I told daddy to tell mommy not to go yet. I need her to wait until I come back from the mall."

Then he showed me a very nice photo of himself where he was laughing. He told me, "I want mommy to take my picture with her so she won't forget me. I love my mommy and I wish she didn't have to leave me, but daddy says that she has to go to be with my little sister."

Then he looked again at the doll with sad eyes, very quietly. I quickly reached for my wallet and said to the boy. "Suppose we check again, just in case you do have enough money for the doll!" "OK", he said, "I hope I do have enough." I added some of my money to his without him seeing and we started to count it. There was enough for the doll and even some spare money.

The little boy said, "Thank you God for giving me enough money!" Then he looked at me and added, "I asked last night before I went to sleep for God to make sure I had enough money to buy this doll, so that mommy could give it to my sister. He heard me! I also wanted to have enough money to buy a white rose for my mommy, but I didn't dare to ask God for too much. But He gave me enough to buy the doll and a white rose. My mommy loves white roses."

A few minutes later, the old lady returned and I left with my basket. I finished my shopping in a totally different state of mind from when I started. I couldn't get the little boy out of my mind.

Then I remembered a local newspaper article two days ago, which mentioned a drunk man in a truck, who hit a car occupied by a young woman and a little girl. The little girl died right away, and the mother was left in a critical state.

The family had to decide whether to pull the plug on the lifesustaining machine, because the young woman would not be able to recover from the coma. Was this the family of the little boy?

Two days after the encounter with the boy, I read in the newspaper that the young woman had passed away. I couldn't stop myself as I bought a bunch of white roses and I went to the funeral home where the body of the woman was for people to see and make last wishes before her burial.

She was there, in her coffin, holding a beautiful white rose in her hand with the photo of the little boy and the doll placed over her chest. I left the place, teary-eyed, feeling that my life had been changed forever. The love that the little boy had for his mother and his sister is still, to this day, hard to imagine, and in a fraction of a second, a drunk driver had taken all this away from him.

*Author unknown*

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## ***Angels at Work***

My five boys ranged from three months to seven years; their sister was two. Their Dad had never been much more than a presence they feared. Whenever they heard his tires crunch on the gravel driveway they would scramble to hide under their beds.

He did manage to leave \$15 a week to buy groceries. Now that he had decided to leave, there would be no more beatings, but no food either. If there was a welfare system in effect in southern Indiana at that time, I certainly knew nothing about it.

I scrubbed the kids until they looked brand new and then put on my best homemade dress, loaded them into the rusty old Chevy and drove off to find a job. The seven of us went to every factory, store and restaurant in our small town. No luck.

The kids stayed crammed in the car and tried to be quiet while I tried to convince whoever would listen that I was willing to learn or do anything. I had to have a job. Still no luck.

The last place we went to, just a few miles out of town, was an old Root Beer Barrel drive-in that had been converted to a truck stop. It was called the Big Wheel. An old lady named Granny owned the place and she peeked out of the window from time to time at all those kids. She needed someone on the graveyard shift, 11 at night until seven in the morning. She paid 65 cents an hour, and I could start that night.

I raced home and called the teenager down the street that baby-sat for people. I bargained with her to come and sleep on my sofa for a dollar a night. She could arrive with her pajamas on and the kids would already be asleep. This seemed like a good arrangement to her, so we made a deal.

That night when the little ones and I knelt to say our prayers, we all thanked God for finding Mommy a job. And so I started at the Big Wheel. When I got home in the mornings, I woke up the baby-sitter and sent her home with one dollar of my tip money-- fully half of what I averaged every night.

As the weeks went by, heating bills added a strain to my meager wage. The tyres on the old Chevy had the consistency of penny balloons and began to leak. I had to fill them with air on the way to work and again every morning before I could go home.

One bleak fall morning, I dragged myself to the car to go home and found four tyres in the back seat. New tyres! There was no note, or anything, just those beautiful brand new tyres. Had angels taken up residence in Indiana? I wondered.

I made a deal with the local service station. In exchange for his mounting the new tires, I would clean up his office. I remember it took me a lot longer to scrub his floor than it did for him to do the tyres.

I was now working six nights instead of five and it still wasn't enough. Christmas was coming and I knew there would be no money for toys for the kids. I found a can of red paint and started repairing and painting some old toys. Then I hid them in the basement so there would be something for Santa to deliver on Christmas morning. Clothes were a worry too. I was sewing patches on top of patches on the boys' pants and soon they would be too far gone to repair.

On Christmas Eve the usual customers were drinking coffee in the Big Wheel. There were the truckers, Les, Frank, and Jim, and a state trooper named Joe. A few musicians were hanging around after a gig at the Legion and were dropping nickels in the pinball machine. The regulars all just sat around and talked through the wee hours of the morning and then left to get home before the sun came up.

When it was time for me to go home at seven o'clock on Christmas morning, to my amazement, my old battered Chevy was filled full to the top with boxes of all shapes and sizes. I quickly opened the driver's side door, crawled inside and kneeled in the front facing the back seat. Reaching back, I pulled off the lid of the top box. Inside was whole case of little blue jeans, sizes 2-10! I looked inside another box: It was full of shirts to go with the jeans. Then I peeked inside some of the other boxes. There was candy and nuts and bananas and bags of groceries. There was an enormous ham

for baking, and canned vegetables and potatoes. There was pudding and Jell-O and cookies, pie filling and flour. There was whole bag of laundry supplies and cleaning items. And there were five toy trucks and one beautiful little doll.

Driving back through empty streets as the sun slowly rose on the most amazing Christmas Day of my life, I was sobbing with gratitude. And I will never forget the joy on the faces of my little ones that precious morning.

Yes, there were angels in Indiana that long-ago December. And they all hung out at the Big Wheel truck stop.

*Author unknown*

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## ***The Crocheted Tablecloth or God's Mysterious Ways***

The brand new pastor and his wife, newly assigned to their first ministry to reopen a church in suburban Brooklyn, arrived in early October excited about their opportunities. When they saw their church, it was very run down and needed much work. They set a goal to have everything done in time to have their first service on Christmas Eve.

They worked hard, repairing pews, plastering walls, painting, etc, and on December 18 were ahead of schedule and just about finished. On December 19 a terrible tempest – a driving rainstorm hit the area and lasted for two days.

On the 21st, the pastor went over to the church. His heart sank when he saw that the roof had leaked, causing a large area of plaster about 20 feet by 8 feet to fall off the front

wall of the sanctuary just behind the pulpit, beginning about head high.

The pastor cleaned up the mess on the floor, and not knowing what else to do but postpone the Christmas Eve service, headed home. On the way he noticed that a local business was having a flea market type sale for charity, so he stopped in. One of the items was a beautiful, handmade, ivory colored, crocheted tablecloth with exquisite work, fine colors and a cross embroidered right in the center. It was just the right size to cover the hole in the front wall. He bought it and headed back to the church.

By this time it had started to snow. An older woman running from the opposite direction was trying to catch the bus. She missed it. The pastor invited her to wait in the warm church for the next bus 45 minutes later. She sat in a pew and paid no attention to the pastor while he got a ladder, hangers, etc., to put up the tablecloth as a wall tapestry.

The pastor could hardly believe how beautiful it looked and it covered up the entire problem area. Then he noticed the woman walking down the center aisle. Her face was like a sheet. "Pastor," she asked, "where did you get that tablecloth?" The pastor explained. The woman asked him to check the lower right corner to see if the initials, EBG were crocheted into it there. They were. These were the initials of the woman, and she had made this tablecloth 35 years before, in Austria.

The woman explained that before the war she and her husband were well-to-do people in Austria. When the Nazis came, she was forced to leave. Her husband was going to follow her the next week. He was captured, sent to prison and she never saw him or her home again.

The pastor wanted to give her the tablecloth, but she told him to keep it for the church. The pastor insisted on driving her home. That was the least he could do. She lived

on the other side of Staten Island and was only in Brooklyn for the day for a housecleaning job.

What a wonderful service they had on Christmas Eve. The church was almost full. The music and the spirit were great. At the end of the service, the pastor and his wife greeted everyone at the door and many said that they would return.

One older man, whom the pastor recognized from the neighborhood continued to sit in one of the pews and stare, and the pastor wondered why he wasn't leaving. The man asked him where he got the tablecloth on the front wall because it was identical to one that his wife had made years ago when they lived in Austria before the war. He wondered how could there be two tablecloths so much alike?

He told the pastor how the Nazis came, how he made his wife flee for her safety and how he was supposed to follow her, but he was arrested and imprisoned. He never saw his wife or his home again all the 35 years in between.

The pastor asked him if he would allow him to take him for a little ride. They drove to Staten Island and to the same house where the pastor had taken the woman three days earlier.

He helped the man climb the three flights of stairs to the woman's apartment, knocked on the door and saw the greatest Christmas reunion he could ever imagine.

*True story told by Pastor Rob Reid  
Above two stories from  
universal-spirituality.net/  
divine-plan-of-salvation/love-in-action/*

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## ***Love In Action***

*A Spiritual Story to Inspire faith and hope.*

*It is Fiction and does not refer to  
actual persons or events.*

Once upon a time there lived a man in England. Matisse was his name. Creation was his greatest passion. Art, music, poetry — each realm was a way for him to express a light-blue energy of universe coming through him to awaken higher levels of consciousness in people. Yoga was his foundation; he went there as deep as he only could and the mystical experiences it provided were integral part of his life. Yoga practice helped Matisse to keep channels in his dark-skinned body clean so he could pour abundance of God into his works.

In his thirties he was rather famous throughout Great Britain. He displayed his works at many exhibitions and people were enchanted by his creativity. He connected 3 spheres into one whole: each picture he created was followed by his music and poems. His greatest desire was to awaken people to feel God deep within themselves. “Let divine seed grow, let your individuality blossom” was his motto. He was realizing God as a transcendental eternal energy which saturated universe. Each second he felt it in the air that surrounded him, he saw it in children's eyes, in the leaves of the trees that were murmuring prayers on the wind and even in the concrete jungles of his native city. He saw God in everything and God was an inner stillness of the Power.

Matisse's life was going on in creativity and work. But then one day while sitting in meditation deep at night being parched with thirst of enlightenment he heard a whisper coming from within: "Go to St. Petersburg to continue your realization — there's a lesson you should study on the lands of Russia." And so he went. His good British friend Frank met him at the airport. He had been living in Petersburg for about six years by this time and still was fascinated by it.

"You are just in time, my dear friend," he said with his eyes shimmering with gladness, "an exhibition of Tibetan art is opening tomorrow. Moreover real Tibetan monks will sing their special prayers there and will build sacred mandala. It's just what you need, isn't it?"

"I guess..."

"To my deep regret I can't invite you to live at my place as Rita, my wife, has very strong negative feelings against dark-skinned people. I can't find a way to make her change her mind. But I've found you a good flat to rent."

Matisse was shocked. His mind was so far away from these prejudices that it was a significant blow for him to realize that people are still steeped in such ideas.

"Frank, this is ridiculous. There's a divine seed in each of us, we are all united as spirits, we just should be brave enough to go deeper to perceive it."

"Well, Mat, it's a matter of time, flaming desire, and hard work. Be aware that there are a lot of people here who think in this way. Prejudices are very strong."

"These people need help to realize who they really are."

"They just need love, Matisse."

The next day, the friends went to the exhibition. The space was full of clean white energy that was circulating around and providing positive changes to all guests and members. Matisse felt clear pearl alive spirit sparkling

with joy inside. And then he saw her eyes. They showed him deepness, consciousness, beauty, but above all the eternal wisdom of a real Woman. In that moment, a new kind of energy awakened within each of them.

No borders, no limits. All masks and disguises faded away revealing ecstatic dance of two pure spirits. Love came as a revelation that became a turning point in their lives. Matisse realized what his creative works were missing and why he always was unsatisfied. Warmness of the heart, yellow light sparkling with gold, love energy that is what he'll fulfill his creations with. Together they will make a space full of light and understanding and will help people to transform themselves into real individuals who are fragrant with freedom.

And so they married. Matisse settled down in St. Petersburg inspired with his new plans. The conception of his mission was to unite people of different nations, religions and customs, to help people to realize that their unique specific traditions and their brightly expressed features deserve to be respected and treated accordingly. “It doesn’t make a difference what color of skin do you have—your individual work, your spiritual growth, your aims—these are the most important things you should think of. Follow the way of love as God is love and it’s real,” Matisse thought to himself.

Matisse and his fabulous wife Ariadna organized a society called “The space of love and light.” They made presentations of Matisse's creations, invited remarkable people from all over the world to make *speeches* within the conception of their society. Ariadna led yoga and meditation classes and organized trips to the holy places of the world guided by professionals.

As time passed by, the gorgeous unordinary couple became famous. People were astonished by paintings Matisse did and by divine music he composed. His works touched

their hearts, brought joy and gladness into their lives. He shared the beauty of real love with all Russian people.

Matisse will remain a remarkable figure in the history of art, music and literature as his appearance highlights the beginning of the new age in Russia—a time of arising consciousness among people, time of inner blossom and developing. Matisse celebrated the forthcoming century of real love that washes away all borders; he inspired Russian people to follow the way of the heart.

*This story was written by Ma Prem Pushpa  
and can be found at [spiritualgrowthevents.com/  
love-in-action-spiritual-story-ma-prem-pushpa/](http://spiritualgrowthevents.com/love-in-action-spiritual-story-ma-prem-pushpa/)*

## *Chapter Thirteen*

# ***Spiritual Exemplars***

*Extraordinary Individuals  
Fueled By Engaged Spirituality*

Spiritual exemplars aren't saints, they are extraordinary individuals across the globe who are an inspiration for making the world a better place. The University of Southern California's (USC) Center for Religion and Civic Culture (CRCC) has identified spiritual exemplars from around the globe, including a Nobel Prize winner, political leaders, community organizers, and others committed to the common good. We spoke with a few of them about overcoming anger, burnout, and systematic roadblocks to their life's work, and discussed social justice and the spiritual practices that sustain, strengthen, and encourage them.

### **No Dead Saints: Alive in Action**

“During my career at USC, I’ve been fortunate to have a lot of international global projects. Traveling all over the world, I occasionally encountered a truly exceptional person who had, in many cases, started an amazing project, often focused on issues related to human rights,” says *Spiritual*

*Exemplars Project* leader Donald Miller. “A lot of the reporting on religion is often negative. It’s about abuse, it’s about corruption, it’s about the decline of a particular institutional religion. And yet my experience was that there are these truly exceptional projects and people who, in a variety of ways, are dealing with issues of poverty, inequality, human rights, and, more broadly, the dignity of all persons, whether it be in the context of genocide or as a result of issues related to racism, or simply people, who through no fault of their own, were born into an extremely poor context,” says Miller, adding that this humanitarianism also includes healthcare, environmental justice, gender equity, peace-building, and more.

He thought, wouldn’t it be interesting to try to document an alternative story about religion and the role of religion. Inspired by this idea, a team of researchers, academics, journalists, editors, filmmakers, and others embarked on a mission to document and profile exceptional people “who were really making a difference in societies around the globe,” says Miller.

The *Spiritual Exemplars* project highlights 104 humanitarians from 42 countries and various faith traditions, including Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Humanism, Indigenous Religions, African Traditional Religions, Old Norse, and others. They were profiled in over 150 articles and visual stories, and highlighted in a podcast series on NPR titled *The Spiritual Edge* (*available at spiritualedge.org*).

“There are a lot of dead saints that have been written about, but we wanted to focus on people who were alive,” says Miller. They wanted well-rounded profiles, not hagiographies. “This project is about purpose-driven human beings whose vision is enlivened through their spiritual practice. However, the idea of a spiritual exemplar “is highly

subjective,” says Miller, adding that humanitarianism is a complex topic, especially when religion is intertwined.

## Countercultural Changemakers

Miller says that the exemplars, in addition to being purpose-driven, tend to be compassionate, courageous, empathetic, and have an indomitable spirit – often working against severe odds. They are optimistic, persevering, and have found their identity, meaning, and purpose in serving others. “They’re also countercultural. I think that’s what makes them exceptional. I mean, they really run against the grain of ordinary human beings,” says Miller, referencing William James, who wrote *The Varieties of Religious Experience* over a century ago.

One of the paradoxes Miller noted about spiritual exemplars is that they exhibit qualities such as peace and joy while also feeling the despair of others so deeply. “We didn’t call them geniuses, and we also didn’t label them as saints, but exceptional people who went against the grain of a lot of societal norms in the sense that they had a vision for social change at a lot of sacrifice to themselves...They pursued that vision, which is where the grit and perseverance play out.”

## Diverse Pathways

“I interviewed Father Greg Boyle of *Homeboy Industries* ([homeboyindustries.org](http://homeboyindustries.org)). He’s a Jesuit, and early on in his life, he chose to pursue that as a religious calling. Then he ended up founding *Homeboy Industries*, following the work of the Christian base communities at Dolores Mission Church in Boyle Heights, Los Angeles—it is the largest gang rehabilitation and re-entry program in the world. For over 30 years, they have stood as a beacon of hope in Los

Angeles to provide training and support to formerly gang-involved and previously incarcerated people, allowing them to redirect their lives and become contributing members of their community.

But other individuals found their path almost accidentally,” says Miller, sharing about Julie Coyne, who went to Guatemala to study Spanish and went on to form a preschool for extremely poor indigenous children.

There is Jean Gakwandi in Rwanda, a survivor of the 1994 genocide who lost most of his family, “but his way of dealing with the trauma of the genocide was to create Solace Ministries,” says Miller.

Many exemplars believe they’re the medium by which God’s work is done. “Sister Rosemary [Nyirumbe] in Uganda told me, ‘I’ve never started a project because I had the money or the resources. I believe in a provident God.’” Miller added, “She’s very observant in her prayer life. A kind of renewal happens daily in terms of confronting the issues she is working with. Engaged spirituality is to engage in your everyday life...projects and programs grow as one responds to the situation’s needs and is inspired by the vision.”

“It’s not just highfalutin spiritualism,” says Miller, calling out those who focus solely on abstract religious and moral principles such as gratitude or love. “This is physical work.”

Stories have a huge potential power to enliven our imagination about what is possible, perhaps incrementally at first, with the possibility that the service will blossom. Miller’s hope is that the exemplars’ stories will inspire others. “This work also transforms the exemplars themselves. They are renewed often in the work,” says Miller. “There’s a reciprocal effect.”

## **With Every Exemplar, a Community**

Exemplar Anton Treuer, Professor of Ojibwe at Bemidji State University in Minnesota, is known for his local and global work on equity, education, and culture.

“I think there has been, throughout the Western world, a heavy and increasing emphasis on individualism, up-by-your-own-bootstraps, entrepreneurial spirit, drive, and ambition. Those things can serve very positive purposes. But they’re also completely at odds with how human beings have made things work for millennia,” says Treuer. “If you go back even just a few thousand years ago, all of us are tribal humans. We’re all living in villages. We didn’t survive because we out-competed the person in the next cave or accumulated more resources than them. We survived because the people in the next cave loved us and would intervene if we were in trouble. So, we are hardwired to need and crave connection, community, belonging, love.”

He shares that those who are very successful by Western standards “have every advantage and privilege, yet have become disconnected from one another and even themselves. This existential angst drives a lot of struggles with spiritual and mental health and well-being,” says Treuer. “My spiritual practice helps me to reconnect.”

“It is not enough to just navigate systems but to work to change those systems to render them more equitable. The more we act in alignment with our spiritual values and principles, and the more that we act not just with performative humility and performative niceness, but with genuine kindness and a genuine desire to serve others, the greater the good we will be able to accomplish.”

## **The Exemplar in You**

Shailly Gupta Barnes is the Policy Director at the *Kairos Center for Rights, Religions and Social Justice and the*

*Poor People's Campaign.* She has a law, economics, and international development background, working for marginalized communities to remedy poverty, racism, ecological devastation, and militarism. She's addressed the water crisis not just in Flint, Michigan, but the water affordability crisis across the United States.

"I believe that anyone and everyone has the ability to make the kind of commitments that I and others have made," says Barnes. "I have to hang my hat on that hope because I'm trying to build a huge social movement that will require many, many leaders.

"You need a community of people that you're building this with. It's the people I talk to every day, the people I'm in touch with and whose work is making a difference on the ground, those are the people that keep me going," says Barnes. "We're committed to a vision of a world that is better, and that is possible, and we're also deeply committed to each other. We can't afford failures and losses, so we fight for each other."

Social justice work is often tedious—back-and-forth scheduling, administrative tasks, etc. "It's not just in the streets with all the intense emotions...A lot of it is just this daily relational building, and that takes time," says Barnes. "Ella Baker famously said the 'spadework' of a real movement is cultivating the kind of leadership and the community around that leadership that can sustain, develop, and replicate itself...leaders aren't just kind of born; they're forged out of struggle, community, and commitment."

Barnes speaks about dharma, the Hindu concept of duty, and identifying the kind of commitment you need to make for your life. Adding that this takes real honesty with yourself about your strengths and weaknesses

"What can I do in this moment? Not the moments that are behind me or in front of me. What are we building right

now? It may be a little scary to take the risk and step outside of and challenge what you think you know,” says Barnes. “And I think there’s something very intuitive about the process of discernment. Listening with your gut, heart, or something that’s pulling you in a certain way.”

She suggests starting where you are—with the people around you. Ask questions like, what is happening in my community? In my city? In my county? “Identify and get involved in different programs at a grassroots level. Just take a step out into this world and see where that takes you,” says Barnes, adding that these programs are often at public spaces such as libraries, schools, churches, and other religious houses of worship. “Put yourself in the position of being next to those who are confronting injustice and being with them in those fights, listening, learning, and then identifying what your role is from there.”

“I believe in the God or goddesses of justice...what they want most is for justice to reign... There’s this fierce battle for saying that I matter, my community matters. I, too, reflect the divine, and I am deserving, and we are deserving of having a life that is worthy of what God intends for this world.”

She often thinks about a prayer adapted from other prayers to Lakshmi, who is often worshiped in the Hindu tradition as the goddess of wealth but also represents well-being, freedom, love, and duty. Barnes incorporates community well-being and the ability to be free of injustice.

“Lakshmi, born out of struggle, calls us to be guided to a world of plenty where there is no hunger, there is no thirst, there is no homelessness. Where we have refuge from poverty, war, fear, and violence, where all needs are met, and maybe most importantly, where peace and love are abundant... that’s where we’ll find freedom. That’s where we’re going to find liberation,” says Barnes. “I have three

children, and I think about the world they're growing into. I want them to have childhoods. I want them to have clean air and good food and not have to worry whether their job will pay them enough to have a nice home. And then for them to want to have children in the future and not be so scared that this world is not a place where another generation can survive. That's the kind of world I want, not just for my children, but for all children, that we should have that kind of peace and love."

*Edited from an article by  
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## *Chapter Fourteen*

# *The Journey of Consciousness*

*By Christopher Nye*

Before I visited *Sekem*, the flourishing intentional community in the Egyptian desert, I'd never heard of the concept of paid time for personal growth—horizon-expanding activities with an emphasis on creativity. I asked the head of farming operations how this worked for a shepherd I had seen that morning tending a herd of sheep. "He comes for painting lessons twice a week," she said.

At Sekem, the cultural life is as important as oxygen and food; workshops get employees acting, singing, and dancing, allowing them to grow, often in ways they never expected. And there are other surprises. This oasis-like place, with forty-foot palm trees, fields of sorghum, and pink bougainvillea cascading over garden walls in what once had been a barren and dusty desert, is the home of several thriving businesses, a net-zero village, a center for innovation in organic agriculture, a destination for people who want to see how society might evolve in the future, a source of community development for surrounding villages, and a

school for employees' children. Perhaps most important, Sekem serves as a starting point for what one of its leaders calls a "journey of consciousness."

This journey began in 1977 with Dr. Ibrahim Abouleish, then a research director of a pharmaceutical company in Austria. Returning to his native Egypt, he paused at a spot in the desert northeast of Cairo, and there he experienced a vision. He describes what he saw in his mind's eye:

*In the midst of sand and desert I see myself standing at a well drawing water. Carefully I plant trees, herbs and flowers and wet their roots with the precious drops. The cool well water attracts human beings and animals to refresh and quicken themselves. Trees give shade, the land turns green, fragrant flowers bloom, insects, birds, and butterflies show their devotion to God, the creator, as if they were citing the first Sura of the Koran.*

In *Sekem: A Sustainable Community in the Egyptian Desert*, his book about how this vision developed, Dr. Abouleish explains the name. The word *sekem* dates back to ancient Egypt, when it was used to connote the sun: not the physical sun itself, but the life-giving force that comes from it. It's a fitting name for a vision that everyone—from the neighboring Bedouin to Cairo professionals and most of his own family—said was crazy. He was crazy to try making a farming community at a desert site that offered nothing but sand and rocks. At times, he relied solely on his faith in Islam, another life-giving force, for the stamina to keep his vision alive.

First came a well, a hundred meters down into the Nile aquifer. Then leveling the ground for fields. Then a composting operation to add organic matter and soil fertility,

and eventually crops of medicinal herbs and teas that could be exported to Europe. What began as one building and a small workroom with women putting spoonfuls of tea into individual tea bags has now grown into a community of two thousand people, with five major businesses, a school, a mosque, a polyclinic, a hotel, dining facilities, and extensive farming operations.

Beyond that, *Heliopolis University*, started by Sekem in the outskirts of Cairo, provides a higher education channel preparing young people for leadership with a particular focus on organic agriculture, community development, and natural pharmaceuticals. The buildings are decorated with art by community members, and the grounds are verdant with plantings and gardens. At the clinic, all rooms open onto a courtyard with flowering shrubs. A friendly cat patrols the area. An air of civility and respect prevails.

Several people I encountered at Sekem, reflecting on its origins, quoted Nelson Mandela: “It always seems impossible, until it is done.”

At Sekem, the cultural life is as important as oxygen and food. To get skeptical farmers to buy into his plan to green the desert and farm without chemicals, Dr. Abouleish had to use his formidable gifts of persuasion. Although not a farmer himself, he brought a scientist’s understanding of the potential that compost offered. He was able to quote from memory verses of sacred writings. “We are not only called upon by Allah to care for the earth,” he told them, “but also to heal what has been destroyed.” Strong chemicals, he argued, destroyed the microlife of the soil, thereby preventing crops from being truly nourishing, or what the Koran terms *tajeb*, meaning “wholesome.”

Abouleish even won adherents to biodynamic farming, an approach that goes several steps beyond organic and includes the inner development of the farmer. “This way of

farming,” he writes, “depends on an alert consciousness which is able to think in a preventative and in an interrelated way.” Allah made mankind responsible for the earth, for plants, and animals. Quoting from the Koran, he notes that Allah originally intended to give this responsibility to heaven and to the mountains, but they refused. Now humankind must take up that responsibility.

When Dr. Abouleish died in 2017, his son Helmy and the staff threw themselves into developing an ambitious plan for the next forty years. This includes, for example, conversion of the entire nation from conventional to organic or biodynamic agriculture. And fewer than seven years in, they have already had success in this direction. Egyptian long staple cotton is generally considered impossible to grow without massive application of pesticides, but after considerable research, the agriculturalists at Sekem discovered a pesticide-free method of crop cultivation that met the demanding criteria of the Global Organic Textile Standard.

With its massive composting operation, Sekem takes palm fronds and other organic waste that otherwise would be burned, chops it up, mixes in cow manure, and treats it with compost starter to make a soil amendment that can turn arid desert soil into a fertile medium for crops strong enough to thrive in the hot, dry conditions—no need for chemical fertilizers or pesticides. The yield is not as high, but profitability is maintained by eliminating the need for expensive chemicals, as well as the premium price commanded by certified organic cotton. Sekem contracts with delta farmers, gins the cotton, makes cloth, and processes it into clothing and soft toys, especially for babies. In the U.S., these sell as the brand *Under the Nile*.

What is this “journey of consciousness” that informs what Sekem has become—a dramatically successful

intentional community based on Islamic principles? It begins with Dr. Abouleish's desire to promote holistic, sustainable development as an alternative to the corporate-minded visions of Western ideals. And it rests on his conviction that social change depends on the inner life of the individual. As early as his student days in Austria, Abouleish set himself on a path of energetic self-change, studying the ninety-nine names of Allah and picking the qualities he wanted to develop in himself: the Compassionate, the Forgiving One, and so on.

"Every time I was meditating on one of these ideals," he writes, "I would find myself in a situation where I could practice them." When he encountered difficulties, which were manifold as he established a viable community in a harsh environment, he treated each one not as a personal assault, but as "a chance to practice self-development," an offshoot of a Koranic value—that humans are capable of being better tomorrow than they are today.

About 90 percent of the community is Muslim. At the side of a dusty plaza near the school's complex sits Sekem's own mosque, a simple building with windows shaped like a crescent moon and sun above the entrance. At four in the morning, loudspeakers call the faithful to prayer. The community observes Islamic holy days. But there is also a small minority of Coptic Christians, and an indication of the relationship between the two groups manifests at the school, where Muslim children bring flowers to the Coptic chapel for Sundays and Coptic children clean the mosque to prepare for Sabbath on Fridays.

Sekem's Islamic values take several forms. One of the five pillars of Islam is the duty to give *zakat*, or alms, and the Sekem community, together with Heliopolis University, brings considerable resources to bear on this, as well as a related form of voluntary giving called *sadaqah*. The polyclinic and health facilities are open not just to employees,

but also to residents of surrounding villages, serving more than twenty-five hundred patients each month. A community development initiative based at the university reaches out to the thirteen villages in the area, offering resources to local schools where it is not unusual to have fifty students in a class and not enough furniture to go around. The university has also set up football fields, brought in coaches, and established teams, providing opportunities to teach social and emotional skills like teamwork and effective communication, which appear to be leading to improved school attendance rates.

I walk down an unpaved street lined by towering Australian pines, where forty years ago there was nothing but bare desert, and head to a cafeteria for employees, where I sit at a long table, along with management, workers, and other visitors. Over a simple but hearty lunch, I ask about the origins of the community's ideals. I'm told that the founder credits his time in Austria with enriching his Muslim consciousness. For example, each morning at the different operations, groups of employees convene in circles to join hands and recite in Arabic the morning verse, whose words, while very much in the spirit of Islam, are actually of European origin:

*[Find] purpose in living,  
Right in our doing,  
Peace in our feeling,  
Light in our thinking.  
. . . trust the working of God  
. . . in the width of the world,  
In the depth of the soul.*

Until Dr. Abouleish instituted traditions like this, it would have been unthinkable for women and men, management and workers, to hold hands in public, yet he was

able to make this a daily practice with the explicit intent of conveying equality and a sense of solidarity. In the early days, when a circle broke up, the founder made a point of shaking the hand of every employee and wishing them well. At the same time, he would look each person in the eye as an affirmation of that person's individuality and to have, as he put it, a window to their soul.

Employees are encouraged to become versatile and explore other jobs. When I visited the school, I met Tamar, a man who had been a senior accountant for Sekem. Dr. Abouleish, recognizing in him a person who was kind, patient, good with kids, and skilled with his hands, encouraged him to consider becoming a teacher. This was such a radical change that it took a while for him to see the wisdom in it. Now Tamar takes immense pleasure in teaching wood carving and ceramics in the school.

The Koran is said to have originally been addressed to three different constituencies, people at three different levels of development. There was no implication that one level was better than another, any more than a teen is better than a young child. Some live mainly in their senses and apprehend the world in a sentient way. They hold fast to family and tribe, and are less communicative and more emotional. Then there are those some apprehend the world in a primarily intellectual manner. They can live in ideas, but their belonging is still self-referential. Finally, some maintain a sensitivity to the interconnectedness of all beings. They assume the responsibility to heal what is broken. This path of inner development informs Sekem's Core Program: to allow employees at all levels to nourish their confidence, creativity, and capacities so that they are able to gradually assume more and more responsibilities and to help their community and the world.

There is a perception among Sekem leadership that we stand at the threshold of a new age. Along with thought leaders on other continents, like Bernard-Henri Lévy, Otto Scharmer, and Ken Wilber, they perceive an imperative for societies to change from a nationalist orientation to consider the whole environment in an integral way. As Helmy Abouleish states in his *Vision 2057* report, “We see ourselves as a driver for the transformation that we need in our society.... We want to continue our journey,...always staying connected to the core of our DNA: consciousness development.”

Early one morning, I step out from the guesthouse where I am staying and soon come to a palm tree with clusters of dates far up in the fronds. Farther along, I see a field of calendula, a sea of orange blooms that will be harvested to make tinctures and skin creams; farther still, a field of eggplant, melons, peppers of different colors, various other vegetables, all grown without chemicals. It’s not exactly the Garden of Eden, but it is a garden, a remarkable testament to what one person in one lifetime was able to set in motion.

*From Orion magazine’s Spring, 2024, issue:  
Rites of Nature, available at [orionmagazine.org](http://orionmagazine.org).  
Christopher Nye, poet and nature preserve manager,  
is at work on a book imagining a post-apocalyptic future  
in which sweeping change in all sectors is possible.*

## *Chapter Fifteen*

# ***Ashoka Envisions a New World***

## *Glimpses of Love in Action Worldwide*

*Ashoka International envisions a world  
in which everyone is a changemaker,  
a world where all citizens are powerful  
and contribute to change in positive ways.*

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## ***How Everyone Can Become a Changemaker***

During a time of political tensions, climate disruptions and rising uncertainties, there has never been a more crucial moment to become a changemaker. After all, the existence of our Earth depends on it. Coined by Ashoka Founder Bill Drayton in 1980, changemakers are the essential keys to creating a utopian world. “No-one had any idea what a social entrepreneur was, there was no word,” Drayton tells *The CEO Magazine*. “We had to invent the word ‘changemaker,’ sitting in what was then called Bombay [now Mumbai, India].”

Quite simply, a changemaker is anyone who takes creative action to solve a problem for the greater good.

Ashoka, which means ‘active absence of sorrow’ in Sanskrit, was founded with this vision at its crux, where its community is driven to form innovative solutions that permanently change existing systems. With a vision for people to achieve positive change through empathy-based living for the good of all, from equality to environmental sustainability and eradicating poverty, Drayton believes everyone needs to become a changemaker in order to truly thrive.

“Being a changemaker is absolutely critical,” he explains. “When everyone’s a changemaker, we don’t have disadvantaged people. The most modest person and the most disadvantaged person can help someone else be a giver. Everyone can give. “The world’s leading social entrepreneurs are really important threads of a tapestry—and it’s a very beautiful tapestry. They’re in it for the good of all, so they see all, which is a huge advantage, and they’re setting out to make big changes.

“Every social entrepreneur wants to help everyone have the power to give, because that’s what brings health, happiness and longevity. We want every single person to have a good life, but in reality, with everything changing and everything being inter-connected, you have to be a changemaker to make it happen.” These award-winning pioneering social entrepreneurs have found leading changemakers in every country, with the highest ratios currently being in India, the US, Indonesia and Brazil.

Through the concept “Everyone a Changemaker,” Ashoka and its 3,700 Fellows in 97 countries are driving the global mission to empower everyone with the skills and knowledge they need to create change. Stemming from local communities up to government levels, across businesses and global conglomerates, being a changemaker spans all aspects of society. And while the term “changemaker” only made it into the dictionary about nine years ago, the concept has been

around for centuries. “The Everyone a Changemaker revolution really took off around 320 years ago, and you can see that curve going up exponentially since then,” Drayton says. “In 1980, which just happens to be when we launched Ashoka, although it’s a 1960s idea, the citizen question of the world’s operations broke free and became extra real and competitive. This is part of that exponential escalation.”

After inventing the term and spearheading the somewhat silent revolution, Drayton says the next step was to get people involved through universities, with the ultimate goal of making social entrepreneurs as respected as physicists or lawyers. “One of our earliest successes was showing anyone anywhere in the world that becoming a changemaker was a real option, because then people would think it’s cool,” he reveals. “My godmother used to stumble around saying, ‘My godson is kind of a lawyer but not really,’ and now all she says is, ‘Oh, my godson is a social entrepreneur, that’s very good.’”

“Everyone a Changemaker completely flows from that. We’re already partially there because this construct is already in everybody’s heads, and you can’t take it out. We’re in the awareness tipping zone right now, and we’re about to hit the change point years. “This is a structure that’s in everyone’s core interest to have everyone else be powerful because you get the greatest possible personal pleasure, and therefore health, longevity and happiness. We want every single person to have a good life, but in reality, with everything changing and everything being interconnected, you have to be a changemaker to make it happen.”

Simplistically, Everyone a Changemaker seems quite uncomplicated—do good things to create a happy, healthy society. However, creating a world of changemakers faces one huge threat: inequality. With habits engrained for generations, Drayton believes the only way to overcome the

inequalities faced is to help everyone become a changemaker. “A society where everyone is helping everyone else to become a giver, this is completely internally consistent and neutrally reinforcing,” he says. “The world is struggling, but everyone – not just a small elite – everyone gets to express love and respect and action. Everybody. They have the power to give.”

### *How to Become a Changemaker*

**Understand the most important quality:** “Conscious empathy-based living for the good of all is key. The number of people, different types and different teams you’re in are constantly changing and morphing—if you don’t have this fundamental ability, no matter how much you try, you’re going to hurt people, you’re going to disrupt groups,” Drayton says. “That’s what’s happening to a big part of the world at the moment—it’s the new inequality and it’s unethical, it’s terrible, it’s a root cause of the division that’s swept the world in the past seven or eight years.”

**Listen to our youth:** “As a kid, you know you have what the world wants, and what the world needs now are people who can see an opportunity to change the world,” he explains. “The moment a kid has had her dream realised, whatever it is, she knows she’s a changemaker. She has that superpower—that’s how it all begins.”

**Start young:** “If your six-year-old daughter hits her four-year-old brother, you have an opportunity to help her master cognitive-based empathy based on the good of all,” he points out. “This takes a lot of learning and practise. You have the opportunity to walk her through four practices in cognitive-based empathy for the good of all.” Drayton suggests following these four practices:

- Ask your child to reflect on themselves by saying: “You must have been pretty upset when you did that. How do you think your brother felt when you did that?”
- Ask the question: “Why do you think he did what he did?”
- Follow up with: “What do you think we should do now?”
- Finally, acknowledge any good behaviour by asking the same questions.

“You don’t have to have a PhD, it’s really simple,” he says. “It works, we know it works. If you do that as a parent, you’re learning that too and you’re becoming a changemaker just as much as your six-year-old daughter. That changes the congregation, the company, the union. Because then you have a group of people who have this, they’re as excited as their kids, and they become a group of people who help congregate change as a whole.”

**Shift your thinking:** “Help your parents or older generations get out of the age trap,” Drayton advises. “You don’t ever say to them, ‘Let me help you with that.’ Instead, you say, ‘Here’s a challenge we need you on.’ When you do that, and you know that you’re doing that, you’ve just become a bigger person, and a happier, healthier person. It’s just completely mutually multiplied. It’s structurally in favour of not lone equality, but everyone growing our abilities.”

**Everyone has the power:** “Women, younger people, older people and Indigenous people – they’re the four biggest groups of people we disempower systematically,” Drayton explains. “There are lots of others but those four are pretty big. Every single person can help stop that. It’s not just about saying it’s a bad thing. Give people the chance to give and change.”

**Spearhead action:** “A key part of getting change done is developing what we call jujitsu partners,” he says, referring to entities that have the influence and leverage to drive significant social shifts. “These jujitsu partners are one of our

most powerful forces if we're going to change society's definition of success and growing up, education unions, universities, schools, general publishers, specialist education publishers and cities or states."

Through the partnership, Ashoka hopes to have the most powerful organisations – that are ethical and a good cultural fit – aligned towards an Everyone a Changemaker world. This then allows the social entrepreneurs to uncover the next generation of leaders.

"We're not looking for the division heads [within the partner organisation]—they're too busy running the existing thing —but the next-generation leaders who are open to and rather like the idea of Everyone a Changemaker. Then we can form a team of five of those people inside the organisation and then connect them," Drayton says.

"We had a meeting in the Amazon a couple of weeks ago with seven young Ashoka changemakers, three schools, a jujitsu partner, a Fellow we elected 29 years ago and another Fellow elected two years ago, and a syndicate of the people who run the school. They all share the same purpose—to make sure every kid in the Amazon gets her or his power as a changemaker. That's what it's about. I can't tell you how exciting this meeting was."

Ashoka's jujitsu partner model is currently in action in Brazil, Nigeria and Indonesia, as well as building blocks in other countries including Bangladesh and the US. "When you're in the presence of a young person who has her power, that's it. That is it. It's evolution speaking to you," Drayton enthuses.

**Embrace the new era of leadership:** "The new leadership, it's not Henry Ford having a great idea that we're going to ask 20,000 people to repeat for the next 30 years—that's gone," he says. "New leadership can envisage, enable

and ensure. It's a really different game. You can't do that if you don't have the first ability."

**Drive change in business:** "The governments were historically structured as monopolies—there's no reason for that," Drayton suggests. "Monopolies can't stand competition, so the money came along with a 'don't compete, don't do that'—and we broke free. It was a revolution. "The old world where you sit there repeating the same thing, occasionally getting a new contract where you repeat transactions, that's gone. You have to have this very different way of organising, and you have to have all your people become changemakers. In an ever-changing world, there are people, not changemakers, who are on the way out."

**Question everything:** "Think about the organisations you care about. Is your company a place that encourages everyone to be a changemaker instead of being a fluid, open, integrated team of teams? How does it work? Is it still an old stoke-cranked bureaucracy with walls and punishments? You could probably do something about that," he says. "Change is very contagious."

**Find a solution:** "Anyone can see a problem—all they have to do is give themselves permission to find a solution and figure out who they want to bring into their team. They can do it," Drayton insists. "If you look at the world of the great social entrepreneurs, it is not astrophysics, it's really simple stuff."

*Excerpted from an article appearing here:  
[theceomagazine.com/business/management-leadership/bill-drayton-changemakers](http://theceomagazine.com/business/management-leadership/bill-drayton-changemakers).*

*For more information about Ashoka:  
[ashoka.org/en-us/about-ashoka](http://ashoka.org/en-us/about-ashoka)*



## ***Stories Have the Power to Change the World!***

*By Ralph Singh*

At the age of 22, I left America to follow my quest for one who could connect me with God—the Eternal Truth that is revealed in all traditions and the Power that drives all creation. As the first foreign devotee of H.H. Baba Virsa Singh ji of Gobind Sadan, a great Saint in the Sikh tradition, I learned first-hand to connect with the Voice of the Cosmos and learned to see directly the same Light in all of nature. Under Babaji's tutelage I began to feel responsible for everyone and everything around, as part of one human family. Nature was already in harmony and it was our responsibility to be in tune.

While I have spoken and written extensively on the need for spirituality and values in education and public life, my work focuses on ways to introduce spirituality in public education and in community building. Much of the social problems and mental health issues we face today grow out of a lack of attention to the inner voice and values which grow from the process.

Our education system has neglected the “whole child,” and my work focuses on developing curriculum and training teachers to use traditional wisdom stories to help children find their own inner voice and learn they can change the story of the world around them. By sharing our stories we can learn to live in community together. Children and adults learn that we don't have to agree with everyone to be part of the same community.

Following the post-9/11 arson attack on our spiritual center, *Gobind Sadan*, USA, North Syracuse, NY (the first attack on a Sikh house of worship) we immediately offered a prayer of forgiveness and went

public with Baba Virsa Singh ji's powerful message of forgiveness which galvanized the entire community and provided an opportunity for the young people involved. This received major local, regional media coverage, and even 20 years later everyone from the young people themselves, the law enforcement officers and DA's office have stated that our approach with forgiveness has transformed their lives and approach to an understanding of spiritual community. The young arsonists wrote to us from jail, "if only we'd known your story, we never would have done this." And this message was delivered by one of them: "Your power of forgiveness overcame the hatred, healed, and transformed my life."

The most important message I could put out there for educators and parents is to teach your children about diversity, cultural difference, but most importantly, teach them we are all the same. Teach them acts of kindness, we are all in this together."

*This story appears at: [ashoka.org/en-us/story/stories-have-power-change-world](http://ashoka.org/en-us/story/stories-have-power-change-world)*

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## ***Roots of Empathy Inducted into Education Innovation 'Hall of Fame'***

Recently the global organization *HundrED* that discovers, researches and shares inspiring innovations for kindergarten to grade 12 education, inducted *Roots of Empathy*, founded by Ashoka Fellow Mary Gordon, into their Hall of Fame. For more than 25 years, Mary has been helping uncover the hidden power of

empathy as a foundational skill for all children, and in extension, all adults. It is a skill that can be “be caught, not taught.”

Mary is an educator, author, child advocate, parenting expert, and the founder of Roots of Empathy, a Toronto-based organization with a global reach. This recognition confirms what we know, empathy is a foundational skill for changemaking and critical to our *Everyone a Changemaker* world. As the world rapidly changes, it becomes necessary that we be able to innovate, adapt, and solve problems. And the ability to do so hinges on people’s ability to practice empathy.

Research has shown that the Roots of Empathy program significantly reduces bullying and aggression with lasting effects, and increases empathy and pro-social behaviours like kindness, inclusion and sharing. The program’s novel approach to fostering empathy brings in a parent and their baby into a classroom nine times over the school year. A Roots of Empathy instructor guides the children to read the baby’s emotional cues and take the baby’s perspective. Children develop an understanding and vocabulary for the baby’s feelings that through the program, becomes a bridge to understand, identify, and talk about their own feelings—even the deepest and most troubling.

The program provides support to students and their teachers as we raise the bar on what it means to be human—to be empathic. Empathy is a pathway to better relationships in childhood that feeds resiliency, happiness and progress towards a more just and kinder world. Education innovations are key to education system transformation, and it is important for more educators in the world to know about the best ones to learn from for their local areas.



## ***Bridging the Gap Between Talent and Opportunity***

### ***Godwin's Changemaker Journey***

*Godwin Kevin is a young changemaker working to ensure access to opportunities for young people. As a passionate advocate for youth leadership and empowerment, he is committed to connecting young people to resources, training and engagements that help them become changemakers. He believes that with proper support, every young person can become a changemaker, allowing them to thrive in today's rapidly changing world.*

#### *The Journey*

In 2018, Godwin hosted an event at secondary school for an audience of over 500 people. At the event, he realized there was a stark issue of educational inequity: no one understood what ‘entrepreneurship’ meant. Godwin found that at school, these students were not getting the type of education that empowered them to become changemakers and global contributors. He also found that youth in his country were not actively involved in key issues and decision-making systems.

Godwin was fortunate to have the opportunity to attend various seminars in which he met other like-minded young changemakers in the city of Calabar and asked himself: why can't more young people become changemakers? Realizing this gap of opportunity was Godwin's ‘aha’ moment. Godwin realized that he could catalyze the creation of more changemakers by sourcing opportunities and providing young people with a platform to fulfill their potential in a rapidly changing world.

### *Inspire for Greatness*

Inspire for Greatness was founded in 2018 to empower young people and give them the opportunities and skills necessary to achieve their full potential as future leaders. Inspire for Greatness is a safe space where young people can share their ideas, develop their talents and defy stereotypes. Through the initiative, Godwin has helped bridge the gap between talent and opportunity by providing young people with self-development programs to cultivate their entrepreneurial and leadership skills. For example, Inspire for Greatness has organized virtual and onsite mentorship programs across Africa. These mentorship programs have empowered young people to build healthy self-esteem and have catalyzed them to take the first steps in becoming a changemaker.

By leveraging his own network, Godwin has made these opportunities and resources freely accessible to young people throughout Africa. At present, Inspire for Greatness has 15 volunteer team members and 30 mentors who support the organization's work across operations, finance, videography and more.

Godwin's advice to aspiring changemakers is to "try to surround yourself with people who inspire and motivate you." These people can be powerful allies who can provide guidance and support. With the issues that we face, such as climate change, gender inequality, human rights, there is a call to action for us to do something". Africa is also facing issues including the lack of quality education, gender equality employment opportunity and youth representation. In the face of these issues, Godwin believes that we "cannot afford to leave these things in the hands of one person, one establishment or one agency". He says that in an Everyone a Changemaker World, "everybody is playing an active role in

the development of their community to create a better and more sustainable world”

In order to achieve this world, Godwin believes that there has to be a change in mentality towards young people, and he advocates for greater youth participation in key decision-making. He also calls for moral support, if not financial support, of young changemakers to create greater impact.

Godwin is committed to advancing youth participation and bridging the gap between talent and opportunity. “This world is ours. And if we don’t do something, who will?”

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## ***Hosting Creative Spaces to Find Your Inner Power***

### *In Yogyakarta, Indonesia*

Lita invites her peers to engage in personal exploration and intellectual bravery, while fostering an environment that supports multiculturalism and changemaking. Art is a courageous medium to express one’s sense of self, and it is also universal; it is a platform to share stories, emotions, and ideas with a global audience. Many young changemakers integrate art into their changemaking initiatives to bring people together.

Lita and her friends embrace the power of art by activating young people in their community to be changemakers through embracing their artistic talents. Lita’s story illustrates how young people can express their authentic voice, talents, and imagination through creativity and collaborative play for the good of all. Maria Angelita, or Lita, learned how to draw from her dad at a young age. Quickly,

she discovered her passion for drawing, noticing that she was capable of channeling and communicating her feelings by illustrating and sharing her stories with her friends. Through rendered pictures, Lita was able to capture on paper what she was feeling inside.

In elementary school, Lita regularly experienced bullying and a lack of support from her school to address the problem. In response, Lita transferred to a more inclusive, diverse school in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. Hesitant to start over, Lita realized her ability to adapt to change and increased motivation to learn once she was in a positive school environment. She quickly made new friends, and together they would get together to paint, draw, and dance.

Lita saw that her friends were also energized by the power of art, including music and dance, and continued to co-create and play. However, across her community in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, Lita and her friends noticed the lack of time and opportunity for young people to express their interests, talents, and voices. In both home and school environments, many young people were not encouraged to explore their artistic interests or engage in creative play because of economic and cultural barriers surrounding “free time.”

As the friends continued to develop and share their artistic passions, more and more young people became intrigued by their group dynamic and were invited to join together with her friends. Painting and playing together they wanted to create a space for young people to engage in creative play and tell their stories with others.

At the age of 14, Lita began to lead an organization with chapters in five schools. Her team encourages young people to find their authentic voice through all art forms, such as writing, drawing, crafting, painting, making music, or dancing. This creative dynamic enables personal exploration

and self-expression while fostering an environment that promotes cross-cultural learning, communication, and understanding.

Innovative and inclusive, Lita and her team employ art as a universal language to tell stories. For example, they work with deaf students, who are able to express themselves through drawing and sign language. This collaborative space encourages teens to engage in discussions about social issues and identify their collective interests, such as the environment. Recently, the team developed an anti-smoking and tobacco-free campaign in their community.

Lita is inspired by other young changemakers, such as Faye Simanjuntak, a teenager who established *Rumah Faye*, an organization that fights against human trafficking in Indonesia. Lita confidently believes that “If she can do it, I can do it too.”

Along with looking toward like-minded peers, Lita finds inspiration and support from her parents, who teach her the importance of hard work and kindness. Lita also emphasizes that her venture would not be possible without the collaboration and leadership of her peers who are equally dedicated to the organization’s mission. Through her initiative, Lita is not only trying to invoke young people to discover their talents but also become well-rounded changemakers who actively participate in their nation’s development. Lita envisions a world where every young person feels brave and confident in voicing their opinions and owning their changemaking power. She encourages young people to develop that bravery and confidence to speak up through art.

Lita’s message to young people is, “You have something in yourself, you have to explore it. Every young person has their own potential...all young people are gifted. All young people have something that they can share,

something that they can use, something good, something potential that is very cool. And you have to find it in yourself.”

## *Chapter Sixteen*

# ***Human Kindness Foundation's Prison Ashram Project***

### *How it All Began*

In 1973 Ram Dass was sending his spiritual book, *Be Here Now*, into prisons and receiving countless letters back. People wrote about their personal transformations and also asked tough spiritual questions: How can you meditate when negative thoughts of anger, shame and guilt engulf you? How can you be loving in such a dangerous place? How can you forgive yourself and others? How can you create inner peace in a noisy, violent and chaotic atmosphere? How can you find freedom behind bars? Bo and Sita Lozoff felt a personal connection with Ram Dass' book as well as with the prison populations because of their own brother-in-law who was incarcerated. They teamed up with Ram Dass to help him reply to mail from people in prisons all over the country.

Thus the *Prison-Ashram Project* was born, and in 1987, *Human Kindness Foundation* was founded to operate it. *Ashram* is a Sanskrit word meaning "House of God." An ashram is a place where people live for a period of time to strengthen their spiritual practice and self-discipline. Many ashrams are very strict. Residents follow a rigid schedule and live very simply.

We never imagined that hundreds of thousands of people doing hard-core prison time would be interested in such an idea. But within the first couple of years, the letters began pouring in and have not stopped to this day. Sita and Bo Lozoff's first book, *We're All Doing Time*, is widely referred to as the convicts' bible. The Village Voice called it one of the ten books everyone in the world should read. Bo and Sita gave talks and workshops in hundreds of prisons, churches and community centers around the world for over 30 years. Bo died in 2012 in a motorcycle accident, and now, with a team of staff and volunteers, Sita continues the work.

Bo had a special connection to those shunned by society. He was wise, kind, inspiring, and helpful to so many. The wisdom and love that passed through him onto the pages of his books and into the hearts of people locked in cells (real or otherwise) remain. His words and insights continue to save lives—we know that from the responses we receive every day.

At the core of our work is the belief that none of us should be judged on our most hurtful actions alone. With a deep awareness of the pain and suffering that people cause, we also honor and hold up their goodness. The genuine love that is tangible in Bo's books helps us spread kindness and bring hope into dark places.

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*Excerpt from  
We're All Doing Time*

After a couple of years of ashram life, it felt like time to put some energy back into the world, and it had become clear to me that prisons were as much in need of help as any place I could imagine. It never dawned on me to do anything as far-fetched as the Prison-Ashram Project; and since I had

no degree or credentials of any sort, my idea was simply to go down and get hired as a guard at the new federal prison which was being built in Butner, N.C., about fifteen miles from the ashram. I figured a compassionate prison guard might be able to do a lot of good on both sides of the bars.

I was turned down, of course; I've got about the least likely background for prison guard as anyone alive. But the assistant warden, who was in charge of interviews, kept prodding me to tell him why I wanted the job. I didn't seem "the type," and he knew something just didn't fit. Seeing that I had no chance for the job anyway, I figured I'd at least get a kick out of being absolutely honest with him. I looked into his eyes and told him that actually I was a "Karma Yogi," that my spiritual path was one of service to mankind, and I thought that being a prison guard would be a good opportunity for doing service.

To my utter astonishment, this crew-cut, cowboy-booted career prison official was suddenly all over me with questions and sincere enthusiasm, saying things like "...And you know what I think? I think reincarnation was taken out of the Bible hundreds of years after Christ!" What a wild moment that was! I loved it. Next, he asked me to write a proposal for doing yoga/meditation classes in federal prisons.

Within a month I was flown to Washington to meet with Norm Carlson, the head of the Bureau of Prisons, and his executive staff. I can still remember sitting at that long table with all those big-shots, and marveling that just a few years earlier, I sat around with revolutionaries arguing about how to blow up those very buildings. Life is really very funny. I got a quick education in bureaucratic hustle. The BOP guaranteed me a job at Butner and made grand promises about "ashram units" and serious training programs. [Before the prison even opened its doors, though, it all fell through.]

But the bigger joke was on them, because they had unwittingly made me an acceptable figure on the national prison scene. I had now been a paid consultant to the U.S. Bureau of Prisons, and I decided to milk that respectability to con my way into prisons and jails to offer classes. The more classes I did, the easier it was to get into still more institutions. Prison doors throughout the world suddenly flew open for me.

Around this same time, Sita & I came across the book *Be Here Now* and struck up a friendship with Ram Dass, its author. Besides having a big impact on our lives, Ram Dass too had a soft spot for convicts and had already sent thousands of free copies of his book into prisons across the country. Together we started refining the idea of helping prisoners to use their cells as ashrams, and do their time as “prison monks” rather than convicts. In late 1973, the Prison-Ashram Project was born. It was financed mostly out of Ram Dass’ pocket until it outgrew his earnings.

By word of mouth, we started receiving letters from prisoners and prison workers all over the world. In 1975, Sita and I left ashram life to devote full time to the project. We moved briefly to Colorado & California, and then we built our own home here in N.C. in 1981. In ‘83, we built the Prison-Ashram Project office about sixty feet behind the house.

We’ve been privileged to send out hundreds of thousands of booklets, tapes and books. I’ve done hundreds of prison workshops and classes, and we’ve helped spawn many other projects and various resources, not just for prisoners, but also for their families, prison workers, and a lot of “ordinary” people who write us letters like this: *Although I’m not in a physical prison, I feel locked in by my fears, anxieties, desires, and anger. My life is getting so closed in, I*

*don't know what to do. Please help me to escape from this prison of my own making.*

At this point, the prison-as-ashram idea is no longer guesswork. We've known a lot of "prison monks"—perfectly normal convicts who decided to go for the inner adventure as we have, and have changed the course of their lives forever. And on our part, dealing with prisons and prisoners has continually pushed us through attachments and impatience, pettiness and hypocrisy. It's too bizarre to worry about whether the granola has sugar in it when there's a letter on my desk from a young kid asking how to deal with being gang-raped. There's an old saying, "If you want to learn something, teach it."

How true! All Sita and I do is to remind people of the things we want to remember ourselves. We started out with pretty naive ideas of sharing yoga/meditation methods, but we quickly came to see all of that stuff as small potatoes. Now we write and talk of the bigger things, like kindness, humor, patience, courage, and self-honesty. The "Big View" isn't the view from the widest ocean or the highest mountain, but rather from deep within each of us, and needs to be seen at some point in our lives, whether in Leavenworth or Beverly Hills.

About the highest compliment in prison is, "He knows how to do his own time." How many of us do? How many of us use every moment of our lives to get a little bit stronger, a little bit freer, no matter what's going on around us—no matter how crazy or violent it all seems to be? This is the constant opportunity we all share. It takes us awhile to cop to it, but people with wisdom have known this forever.

Isn't it hilarious that Sita and I—two lost souls who tried to escape from the world by sailing the wide ocean—have found a lot of our own freedom by helping people figure out how to discover their vastness in a 6'x 9' cell? The Divine

Humor is truly mad, and it just doesn't quit. Imagine what life would be like if we didn't know how to use our arms or hands; if they just hung limply at our sides. How limited and clumsy our daily lives would be, how much we would be missing, for no good reason at all!

Yet it's even more so with our Spirit. We may live, breathe, walk and talk, but most of the time we don't use more than a fraction of our spiritual power that would make life feel infinitely more natural and more worth living. It's not that we're "bad" or wicked or anything like that. We're just spiritually clumsy; we're way out of balance because we usually see life from the view of the mouse—worrying endlessly about the terribly limited world at the tips of our whiskers. Wisdom and joy come only from learning how to see a wider, much more wondrous world; and power comes only from the Spirit within. This is why most of us end up feeling weak, lifeless, weary to the bone; we drag ourselves around just trying to make it through each day, often pausing to wonder whether the good times in life are worth all the effort and pain.

Changing our vision begins with a look at the two worlds we inhabit at the same time: The outer world of appearances, and the inner world of Spirit. From the world of appearances, life may look very different from one minute to the next, one person to the next, or one age of the world to the next. But from the "Big View"—from the world of Spirit—there's only one process going on: We get born, we have good times and bad times, we experience a wide range of emotions such as desire, love, anger, and fear, we face various problems and challenges that make us feel good or bad about ourselves, we learn some things and forever wonder about other things, and then we move on into the unknown.

Life is truly just this one story, and it fits Joan of Arc as well as Adolf Hitler; primitive tribesmen as well as

Harvard professors. Whether we get from place to place on foot, or oxcart, or in a Ferrari; whether we carve our messages into a stone, or type them up on a computer; whether we live in caves, huts, or three-bedroom brick ranchers, does it really change that basic spiritual story line?

But here's a mystical secret: Each of us has the starring role in this Great Movie. We're all heroes, adventurers, who have a lot of ups and downs, who may stumble and fall a million times—but we can become strong, wise, and free by the end. It's really a very beautiful story. The "outer" world of appearances, what we usually call reality, is nothing more than a prop room. It contains everything that operates under the Law of Time.

Think about it: No matter what we ever get or have, we won't be able to hold on to it for very long. Our possessions, our greatest inventions, even the wonders of nature and our own bodies—merely props: We use them for awhile, but then the parts rust, the paint peels, the flesh sags, the heart stops, the Earth quakes; even the sun will eventually burn out. What time brings us, time takes away. It's all part of the deal.

But time itself is no more than a stage-prop to the "inner" world, the world of Spirit. There's a Great Mystery going on here; a Great Natural Riddle which has lain deep in the mind of every human being ever born including me and you. Because this mysterious Spirit can't be seen, heard, tasted, smelled, or touched, most of us let our curiosity slide as we grow up. Even though we're never quite satisfied in the outer world, we limit our attention to our mousy busyness all our lives and try to believe that's all there is to reality. Society doesn't run too well on mysteries, so the standard policy seems to be: If we don't understand it, it must not exist. Problem solved. But living in such a limited way is bound to be a drag sooner or later, and this is what the Buddha talked about in his "Four Noble Truths", and it's what Jesus said

about needing to be “born of the Spirit” in addition to being born of the flesh.

These and other masters also gave us practical tips on how to go about correcting our vision: Seek ye first the Kingdom of God, and everything else will be added unto you. And when someone asked Jesus just where to find this spiritual kingdom, He said, *Neither shall you say ‘ho, here!', or ‘ho, there!', but the Kingdom is within you.* The advice is pretty simple. The problem is, there are some spectacular props in this movie, and most of us stay so busy chasing them, our lives are almost over before we start to think about how empty we feel. Seeking “first” this inner kingdom is not so much a matter of becoming a religious fanatic nor going off to a hidden cave in the mountains, but rather to simply PAY ATTENTION spiritually as we go about our normal lives.

“First” is a matter of moment-by-moment priorities, not months or years. When our central aim is to find this “inner kingdom,” then we discover how it is that everything comes to us: We see that every person, place, and event in our lives is perfectly designed to teach us something we need to learn in order to get free. So we get hit by a truck or elected to office, we get sent to prison or win a million dollars, we get terminal cancer or become rich and famous—we learn spiritual lessons from all of it equally. We use every situation, every moment of our lives to get looser, wiser, and freer. This is what Jesus called “being in the world but not of it,” and what in the East is known as Zen, Karma Yoga and Tantra Yoga. We just have to stay open and wide awake, being students—rather than victims—of our lives.

It helps a lot if we can remember this: Life, like any other exciting story, is bound to have painful and scary parts, boring and depressing parts, but it’s a brilliant story, and it’s up to us how it will turn out in the end. The Spiritual Mystery

of our true inner nature is what makes sense of it all, but it can't be found in words, books, philosophies, or even religions. We have to solve it for ourselves by being sharp and noticing all the clues. And we have to calm down quite a bit in order to do that.

It may take a very long time and a great deal of effort, but as many of us have noticed by now, life makes no sense at all without diving into the wonder and challenge of that Great Mystery. *It can't be found by seeking, but only seekers will find it.* From the moment we're born, something deep inside pushes us to cry out for our mother's breast, a loving touch, a strong arm to rock us and soothe us. We're always seeking. We seek to feel safe, loved, warm—in a word, we seek a state of peace. At first, our mother is enough for us, but lasting peace is part of the Mystery; it can never be found in the world of appearances.

Soon we come upon toys, games, friends, new kinds of food, and on and on. Everybody just wants to feel good, and we keep reaching for anything that might do the trick. Yet the more things we discover, the hungrier we seem to be for still more. Every joint smoked, every drink drunk, every pill popped, every crime committed, is just to get some relief—just to feel good, to feel safe or powerful. It's like going crazy from a toothache without knowing what to do about it; we blindly grope around in pain, and some people do it more violently than others.

Perhaps the most important realization of our whole lives is when it finally hits us that Nothing we ever get, see, taste, smell, touch, hear, or think about, is going to bring us the peace we really seek. This is what the Buddha called his First Noble Truth. We tend to fight against this natural law, so we suffer more and more. There are some people who get all the power, success, fame, or riches they thought they wanted, and instead of being happy, they soon destroy themselves. We

don't have to look very far for examples: Elvis Presley, Freddy Prinze, John Belushi, Judy Garland, Marilyn Monroe, Lenny Bruce, Jimi Hendrix, Billie Holliday—the list could go on for pages. What clearer reminder do we need that if we're not at peace with ourselves, then we're all doing time in one kind of prison or another?

Sitting in the hole in Attica or Joliet or Santa Fe, it's hard to imagine that some swinging millionaire in a Beverly Hills mansion could possibly be suffering as much, but it's true. In fact, that "uptown" suffering is often worse, because their minds can't come up with as many excuses for being so miserable, for why life is so unbearably painful. But excuses are just that—excuses. Making excuses gets to be our way of life if we don't watch out. In prison, for example, most people tend to exaggerate about how wonderful life on the streets was, or else they fantasize about how great it's going to be the next time out. But truthfully, if life on the streets was so great, then why is everybody in the joint? And why do so many ex-cons wind up back in prison within a year or two?

The truth is, life everywhere is very hard, because we're holding so much pain from being out of balance. Like it or not, the BIG Truth has to be approached from all the smallest truths about ourselves; the journey into the GREAT Mystery has to begin by solving all the dull, practical mysteries of our lives, like why we keep making the same kinds of choices which hurt us time after time.

Whether in prison or business or college or anywhere else, we become a hell of a lot sharper when we look at life more clearly, when we can see ourselves more honestly. A Medicine chief said, *If you seek to understand the whole universe, you will understand nothing at all. If you seek only to understand your Self, You will understand the whole universe.* So it makes sense to begin looking into our own true nature, which is what every spiritual tradition has told us

to do. Then no matter what happens, we've always got the house advantage, because we're living in tune with the house rules of the Universe.

To live with the house advantage, the main rule we need to appreciate is called the Law of Karma. In the Bible the way it's put is *As you sow, so shall you reap*. The way it's said in prison is, *What comes around goes around*. Every thought, word, and deed is a seed which we plant in the world. All our lives, we harvest the fruits of those seeds. If we plant desire, greed, fear, anger and doubt, then that's what will fill our lives. Plant love, courage, understanding, good humor, and that's what we get back. This isn't negotiable; it's a law of energy, just like gravity.

*This chapter excerpted and edited from  
humankindness.org and We're All Doing Time.*



*Interlude*  
*A Quintet of Short “Instrument of Love” Stories*

## ***The Enchanted Grove***

*A Spiritual Story About Celtic Shamanic Healing*

In the verdant hills of Eireann, nestled amidst the lush landscape, lived a woman named Aislinn. Her spirit, once as luminous as the rising sun, had dimmed under the weight of an inscrutable sorrow—a grief that entwined itself around her heart like ivy on ancient stone.

Days ebbed away, their passage unnoticed, until Aislinn stumbled upon a weathered trail that wound its way through the mist-laden forests to an ancient stone circle. Amidst the swirling whispers of the woods stood Cian, a revered Druid whose eyes seemed to hold the wisdom of time itself.

“Aislinn,” Cian spoke, his voice carrying the secrets of the land. “Your heart harbors wounds that fester in the shadows.”

Aislinn gazed at him, feeling the weight of unspoken sorrows. “Can you mend what's broken inside me?”

Cian nodded, guiding Aislinn through the arcane paths of healing. He spoke of the Tripartite Cosmology—the Realm of Land, Sea, and Sky—teaching her to commune with the heartbeat of the earth, the rhythm of the ocean's currents, and the celestial dance of stars in the sky's tapestry.

But the journey to healing was no mere stroll through the forests. Aislinn faced the daunting task of relinquishing the hold of past wounds—the specters that clung to her soul like mist clinging to the morning dew. “How can I untangle what binds me?” she implored, tears tracing silken paths down her cheeks.

Cian's voice, resonant with ancient wisdom, echoed through the sacred stones. “In the cauldron of forgiveness, brew the elixir of liberation. Forgive not for their sake, but for your emancipation. Let the river of compassion flow within.”

Day after day, Aislinn journeyed with Cian, learning the language of the trees, the whispers of the stones, and the healing properties of the forest's herbs. With each step, gratitude bloomed in her heart, weaving itself into the fabric of her being.

One twilight, amid the standing stones, Cian whispered, “Tonight, the veils between worlds grow thin. Seek your answers in the Otherworld.”

Aislinn closed her eyes, her spirit traversing the ethereal realms. Ancestors whispered tales of resilience, their voices carried by the ancient winds.

In that liminal space, Aislinn encountered the spirit of her departed kin. “Why did you leave me?” she questioned, the ache as vivid as the setting sun.

Their voices, like distant melodies, replied, “We are but ripples in the eternal stream. Embrace our legacy; let it be your guiding star. In our bond, find resilience.”

Returning to the material realm, Aislinn found solace in their spectral counsel. Cian's eyes glinted with pride. “You've glimpsed the profound connection—the bridge betwixt realms.”

As the seasons cycled, Aislinn's heart flourished anew, akin to the blossoming buds of spring. She traversed the mist-

shrouded paths, now aglow with the luminosity of her inner healing.

One evening, Cian bestowed upon Aislinn a woven talisman. “This holds the essence of your odyssey—the healing melody of your soul. Carry it as a beacon.”

Aislinn clutched the talisman, feeling the resonance of her transformation. “Thank you for illuminating my labyrinthine journey.”

Cian smiled, his gaze tracing the horizon. “Remember, Aislinn, the Celtic healing journey is an eternal dance—a sacred spiral intertwined with life's cycles.”

Aislinn nodded, her spirit brimming with gratitude. As she ventured forth, she carried not merely a talisman but the wisdom of the ancients—a beacon of hope and healing for those seeking solace.

In the days that ensued, Aislinn embraced her role as a healer. She beckoned those burdened by their shadows to the stone circle, where she shared the rituals of healing—the grounding touch of the earth, the cleansing embrace of the sea, and the whispers of the sky's ancient wisdom.

In the embrace of twilight, Aislinn gathered seekers around the hallowed stones. Her voice, resonating with the lore bestowed by Cian, reverberated across the hills. “Feel the earth's pulse beneath your feet. Let the land cradle your spirit.”

The seekers closed their eyes, inhaling the fragrance of nature, feeling the earth's energy infusing their essence.

Aislinn continued, her words weaving a tapestry of healing. “Envision the sea's waves, purging fragments of pain. Allow the water's embrace to purify and renew.”

The assembly swayed, mirroring the rhythm of ocean tides, their movements in sync with the ancient healing cadence.

As night descended and stars emerged, Aislinn raised her hands to the celestial expanse. “Look to the heavens, where dreams take flight and hopes align with constellations. Connect your inner light to the cosmos.”

The seekers lifted their faces, sensing the cosmos' embrace as they danced within the cosmic rhythm.

In the following days, Aislinn delved deeper into Celtic shamanism's teachings. She explored the lore of sacred flora, comprehending their healing essence and the art of concocting herbal elixirs. With each brew, she imbued intentions of love and healing, offering them to those in need. One autumn dawn, Aislinn wandered the mist-kissed paths, collecting forest herbs with purpose. A mother approached, her eyes clouded with despair.

“I've heard of your healing gifts,” the woman said, her voice trembling. “My child is ailing, and no remedies avail. Can you?”

Aislinn nodded, leading the woman to her humble abode. With gentle hands, she brewed a concoction infused with healing intentions.

“Administer this to your child,” Aislinn instructed, handing her the elixir. “Let love and hope weave a path to health.”

Weeks passed, and the mother returned, tears of joy streaming down her face. “Your elixir healed my child when all else faltered,” she exclaimed, embracing Aislinn in gratitude.

Aislinn smiled, her heart overflowing with joy. She recognized herself as a conduit—a vessel channeling the healing energies that surged through her.

Through the rhythm of seasons, Aislinn continued her healing pilgrimage. Her talisman, a tangible relic of her metamorphosis, shimmered in daylight—a testament to the wisdom she bore within.

In the stillness of twilight, Aislinn returned to the sacred stones where her odyssey commenced. She closed her eyes, sensing the earth's heartbeat, the stones' whispers, and the vast embrace of the sky.

Cian's teachings echoed within her. “Remember, Aislinn, the Celtic healing journey is a sacred spiral entwined within life's cycles.”

Overflowing with gratitude, Aislinn whispered her gratitude to the ancient spirits who had guided her. She understood her path would persist, interwoven with ancient rites—a guiding light for those seeking healing.

Amidst the craggy hills and winding valleys of the ancient Celtic lands, Aislinn continued her journey of healing and spiritual discovery. Guided by the teachings of Cian, she ventured deeper into the mystical realms of the natural world, seeking greater understanding and connection.

As the seasons shifted and the wheel of the year turned, Aislinn found herself drawn to the ancient oak groves that held echoes of timeless wisdom. There, under the canopy of ancient trees, she communed with the spirits of the forest, learning the language of the woodland creatures and the healing properties of plants that thrived in the dappled sunlight.

In the heart of the grove, Aislinn encountered Branwen, an elder Druid whose presence resonated with the ancient energies. “Aislinn,” Branwen said, her voice a melodic whisper carried by the breeze. “You carry the light of the ancient ones within you.”

Branwen became Aislinn's guide, sharing knowledge passed down through generations—the chants that resonated with the earth's heartbeat, the ceremonies that honored the changing seasons, and the art of divination using sacred symbols and runes.

Under Branwen's tutelage, Aislinn learned to attune herself to the subtle energies that flowed through the natural world. She discovered the power of ceremony and ritual, understanding the importance of honoring the interconnectedness of all life.

With Branwen's guidance, Aislinn ventured into the heart of the forest on moonlit nights, where she communed with the spirits of the land. She danced beneath the stars, feeling the ancient rhythms of the earth coursing through her veins. She listened to the whispers of the wind and the secrets whispered by the rustling leaves.

Through these encounters, Aislinn deepened her connection with the spirits of nature. She learned to communicate with the unseen forces that shaped the world around her, finding solace and wisdom in the silent guidance they offered.

In her secluded sanctuary nestled within the heart of the forest, Aislinn crafted sacred talismans imbued with intentions of healing and protection. Each amulet was woven with threads of ancient wisdom and blessed under the light of the full moon, becoming vessels of potent energy and guardians of harmony.

Word of Aislinn's healing prowess and her communion with the spirits spread throughout the Celtic lands. People from distant villages sought her guidance, drawn by the whispers of her wisdom and the tales of miraculous healings. Aislinn welcomed them with an open heart, guiding them through the sacred rites of healing—the laying of hands, the chanting of ancient hymns, and the anointing with oils infused with the essence of the natural world.

With each healing session, Aislinn witnessed the transformative power of the ancient practices. The sick found solace, the weary found strength, and the troubled found peace in the embrace of her healing rituals.

In the heart of winter's embrace, Aislinn sat by the hearth, tending to the flames that danced and crackled with the stories of ages past. She contemplated the lessons learned, the connections forged, and the wisdom gained on her remarkable journey.

Branwen visited her once more, her presence shimmering with an ethereal glow. “Aislinn,” she spoke softly, “you have embraced the ancient ways, becoming a beacon of healing and light for all who seek solace.”

With a sense of reverence and gratitude, Aislinn bowed to Branwen, honoring the guidance and wisdom bestowed upon her. She felt a profound sense of purpose—a calling woven into the very fabric of her being.

And so, Aislinn continued her sacred path, traversing the mystical realms, and tending to the spirits of the land. Her story became woven into the tapestry of Celtic lore—a testament to the enduring power of connection, reverence for nature, and the healing journey that resides within every soul.

*Author Unknown*

*Story can be found at [spiritualgrowththeevents.com/  
enchanted-grove-celestial-shamanic-healing-story/](http://spiritualgrowththeevents.com/enchanted-grove-celestial-shamanic-healing-story/)*

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## ***Legend of the Unsinkable Soul***

In the quiet and quaint town of Maplewood, nestled amidst lush greenery and babbling brooks, lived a man named Jonathan Monroe. Jonathan was a mild-mannered accountant

who spent his days poring over numbers and financial reports. But beneath his composed exterior, Jonathan yearned for something more—a life filled with happiness, inner peace, and fulfillment.

As the years passed by, Jonathan found himself stuck in a cycle of waiting. He believed that achieving certain goals would bring him the contentment he craved. “I’ll be happy when I get that promotion,” he often muttered to himself. “I’ll be peaceful when I have enough money saved for that dream vacation.”

The truth was that Jonathan spent most of his life waiting, always looking to the future for happiness and fulfillment. But the waiting only bred discontentment and stress, leaving him feeling more lost than ever before.

One fateful day, as Jonathan sat by the window of his small apartment, a mysterious package arrived. The box bore no sender’s address or any indication of what lay inside. Intrigued, he unwrapped it to find a worn-out journal with the words “*Unsinkable Soul*” embossed on the cover.

Curiosity piqued, Jonathan opened the journal to find a letter written in elegant cursive:

“Dear Seeker,

*In your pursuit of happiness, you have forgotten the essence of life—the present moment. Within these pages lies the key to unlocking your unsinkable soul.*

*Embrace these truths, follow the steps outlined, and you shall find the peace you seek.*

*Remember, happiness is not a destination; it is a choice.*

*Yours, A Friend in the Shadows”*

Though skeptical, Jonathan decided to give the journal a chance. As he delved into its pages, he discovered the five steps that promised to transform his life:

*Step 1: Surrender to What “Is”*

Jonathan realized that he spent too much time resisting his current circumstances. He decided to embrace acceptance, acknowledging that life was not perfect and that challenges were part of the journey. By surrendering to the present moment, he freed himself from unnecessary stress and allowed room for positive change.

*Step 2: Don’t Believe Everything You Think*

As Jonathan became more mindful, he observed his negative thoughts and their impact on his emotions. He practiced shifting his perspective, looking for silver linings in challenging situations. By changing the story he told himself, he found a new sense of hope and resilience.

*Step 3: Be Grateful*

Jonathan started a gratitude journal, listing 50 things he was grateful for each day. At first, it was difficult, but soon, he found that acknowledging the blessings in his life shifted his focus from what he lacked to what he had.

*Step 4: Let Go of the Past*

The most challenging step for Jonathan was to let go of past grievances and regrets. With courage, he forgave those who had hurt him, including himself. By releasing the burden of the past, he felt lighter and more at peace.

*Step 5: Forgive and Set Yourself Free*

Forgiveness proved to be the ultimate key to Jonathan's transformation. He reached out to those he had held grudges

against and sought reconciliation. As he released the weight of anger and resentment, he experienced a profound sense of liberation.

Each step took time and effort, but Jonathan persisted, determined to uncover the wisdom within the journal's pages. Slowly but steadily, he noticed changes in his life. He no longer felt like a prisoner of waiting, but a master of his own happiness.

As the seasons changed in Maplewood, so did Jonathan. His colleagues noticed a newfound sense of ease and positivity in his demeanor. He seemed to radiate inner peace, inspiring others to seek out the source of his transformation.

One evening, as the sun set over the picturesque town, Jonathan decided to share the journal's teachings with his community. He gathered his friends and neighbors at the town hall and told them about his journey to find happiness and inner peace.

The room fell silent as Jonathan spoke about the five steps he had embraced. He emphasized the importance of living in the present, of letting go of past grievances, and of choosing happiness in every moment. Inspired by his words, the townspeople vowed to embark on their own journeys toward an unsinkable soul.

As the years passed, the town of Maplewood became a beacon of happiness and contentment. The people of the town learned to let go of their burdens, embracing acceptance, gratitude, and forgiveness. They no longer waited for happiness; instead, they chose it every day.

And so, the Legend of the Unsinkable Soul spread far and wide, reaching hearts across the world. Jonathan's story became an inspiration for millions, reminding them that the

key to true happiness and inner peace lay not in the future but in the embrace of the present moment.

*Author Unknown*

*This story can be found at spiritualgrowthevents.com/  
spiritual-story-legend-of-the-unsinkable-soul/*

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## ***The Decision To Change***

*By Moshe Gersht*

All the external parts of your life are like a dream. The Talmud says if you really want to live, then die before you die. Let go of the shell you’re in while you’re alive so you can get out of the cage that holds you. Then, share the message with everybody else.

Not long before I made the decision to leave the rock band, I invited a friend of mine over for Friday night dinner. We called it for 7:00 p.m., but as I continued to glance at the clock, it quickly went from 7:15 to 7:45. I looked at the food on the counter and realized he wasn’t showing up. My table faced the door, and I had left it wide open so I could hear him if he was lost and looking for it, but what happened instead changed my life. My neighbor Alex, who I had been cordial with but never really spoke to, saw me sitting there waiting, and said, “Hey, come on over and join us.”

Alex and his partner, their roommate, and I sat around the dinner table for about an hour and a half, talking about the band, touring, and all the great things we had accomplished. Then Alex looked at me and said, “Moshe, it looks like you have something weighing on you. What’s on your mind?” I

realized then he had a keen sense with people because we had just met, and there he was, absolutely right. I told him I was having second thoughts about the band.

“Well, do you have a picture of what you would like your life to look like in ten years?”

I hadn’t thought about it until he asked me, but I closed my eyes and could see a vision of who I wanted to be. It was so clear. I started describing the vision of a young man who was married with children, walking his kids to school, being involved in community work, and helping and assisting others with their spiritual pursuits. When I finished describing the vision I had seen, I looked at Alex, and his eyes were filled with tears.

“Alex, I know I paint a pretty picture, but why on earth are you so emotional about it?” He looked me in the eyes and said, “I had that kind of clarity once, but I chose to listen to others about what I should do and how I should live my life. I didn’t want to go to law school, but I did because of my parents, my scholarship, and a lot of external pressure. It’s been ten years, and I am just figuring that out now.

“Every day that goes by that you don’t take a step in the direction of your vision, you are adding a black and white pixel onto the screen of your life. Soon, the vision will be gone, the inspiration will fade, and you will have had your life chosen for you instead of choosing your life for yourself. Make a decision and start today.”

After he said those words, I was changed. It was a moment of grace, a moment where I was given another chance and an opportunity to start again and live a life I wanted to live. They say people who are successful make decisions fast and change their minds slowly. People who aren’t successful make decisions slowly and change their minds fast. If you know, then you know. You can take a step or an entire leap. It’s up to you.

My invitation to you is to make a change today and not care about the conditions of others, but rather the Three Conditions of your soul. These are the conditions that make you human, keep you alive, and open you up to a world of infinite possibilities and the fulfillment of knowing what you are here to do and be. I wish you so much blessing, success, love, and guidance in everything you are going to experience in your life. Shine like the sun and be a light for everyone in your life. Only you have the power to create the better you. Use your gifts and live your most joyous life. Don’t wait until tomorrow. Do something today to show your commitment to living that life you once considered a myth. If you’re happy, you’re helping. Let intention, joy, and certainty lead you to living a miraculous life. I love you.

*Excerpted from The Three Conditions: How Intention, Joy, and Certainty Will Supercharge Your Life, Sounds True. Rabbi Moshe Gersht “made it” as a pop-punk rockstar by the age of 20. He found himself wondering what living a successful life actually entails. This question led him to Jerusalem, where he experienced a spiritual awakening. He went on to spend two decades in Israel immersed in Torah study, prayer, and meditation as well as the mystical teachings of Kabbalah and Chasidus. Today, he is an international speaker, author, a meditation guide, and spiritual teacher helping people find fulfillment through self-discovery. From [dailygood.org/story/3177/the-decision-to-change-moshe-gersht/](http://dailygood.org/story/3177/the-decision-to-change-moshe-gersht/)*



## ***Love of the Lord and Misfortune***

*A brief excerpt from a recent retelling  
of the Indian classic, The Mahabharata, as offered in  
The Lost City of Sri Krishna by Vanamali.*

*This dialogue took place 5000 years ago at the end of a horrible war. Kunti is a woman deeply devoted to God in His form as Lord Krishna and to serving others, no matter what the cost. In Hindu culture she is considered the pinnacle of womanhood. After all her grandchildren have been murdered in the war, Krishna is approaching her and...*

Kunti rose up from her seat when he approached and looked at him with grief-stricken eyes. “Salutations to you, O thou divine being! Just as an ignorant person cannot recognize an actor when he is on the stage, so too have we failed to recognize you, who have chosen to mask your divinity under the guise of an ordinary human being. Due to your grace, I have been able to penetrate the mask and perceive your divinity.

Salutations to you, O noble one! Just as you released your parents from the tyranny of Kamsa, so you have saved me and my sons from countless murderous attempts by the Kauravas. And now you have saved our line from extinction by saving the fetus in Uttara’s womb.”

My Lord held her as she was going to fall at his feet and said, “Mother, ask for any boon and I shall grant it.” To my amazement Kunti said, “O noble one! I pray to you to give me misfortunes all the time. Let dangers surround me always, for it is only when peril threatens us that we are able to feel your divine presence. Our minds become single-pointed only in extreme sorrow and then we are able to call

you with intensity. At that time you come running to rescue your devotees from all harm.

“Therefore, I do not pray for comfort. When we are surrounded by ease on all sides, the treacherous mind fails to focus on you, who alone are responsible for both joy and sorrow. Therefore, I thank you for having given me a load of sorrow to bear all my life. I thank you for not having given me wealth as it has made me realize that you are my only treasure. You alone are the wealth of those who have no wealth. I care not for kingdom or glory but only wish to have your blessed vision all my life. I deem you to be the eternal time spirit, endless and irresistible, which makes no distinction between good and evil, small and great. This is what brings about feuds among people leading to their death and destruction.

“The apparent birth and activities of the unborn and unchanging spirit, the Soul of the universe, is indeed a mystery. O Lord of Lords! Pray do not abandon those of us who are totally dependent on you. I have no refuge except your lotus feet. Like the Ganga flowing toward the ocean, let my mind constantly flow toward you, for you are the infinite ocean of compassion, the never-ending stream of love and delight. O Krishna! Friend of Arjuna! Protector of the weak and holy! Master of yoga! I salute you again and again!”

So saying she fell like a log at my Lord’s feet, overcome with ecstasy at having the vision of this glorious being who stood before her in flesh and blood. My Lord cast his compassionate gaze on her and said, “O Mother! You will always have total and undying devotion to me, and I will always protect you under all circumstances as I have always done.” So saying he placed his lotus hands on her head and blessed her and helped her to rise.

“Why do you love her so much?” I asked.

“*Bhakti* [pure love for the Divine] is something that draws me to people. It is the invisible rope that is capable of tying the infinite to the finite.”

*This dialogue has helped millions over the millennia to consider the difference between worldly pleasure and Divine Love. As a wise woman, Kunti reveals how easy it is to forget our connection with our Divine Beloved amidst pleasant distractions, and how naturally we remember our Beloved in times when peril threatens us. This same insight arises in the lives of Christian Saints also.*

*While most of us may find Kunti’s request “extreme,” our seeking to be an instrument of Divine Love, sometimes even at the cost of personal suffering, might well seem “extreme” to some of our families and friends. But our hearts know the source of our greatest joy, and don’t we feel incredibly blessed when we can willingly “pay the price?”*

*The Lost City of Sri Krishna by Vanamali  
is Published by Inner Traditions*

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## ***The Cave of the Eternal Light***

Once upon a time, in a far away land, there lived a wood-gatherer and his family. These people were very poor, and they had to labor from sun-up till sundown to barely survive. They were simple folks, though, and they accepted their lot with tranquility and thankfulness.

One day, as the wood-gatherer was walking through the forest, he came across a shining Holy Man meditating in a clearing. Never in his life had he seen a being who radiated such splendor! In awe, he waited and watched.

After a time, the Holy Man opened His eyes and noticed the wood-gatherer. Gradually the sweetest, most compassionate smile filled his face, and He beckoned the wood-gatherer to come and sit beside Him.

An hour passed in an instant, and eventually the wood-gatherer remembered that if he did not get on with his duties, his family would not be fed that evening.

Understanding, the Holy Man nodded and smiled. “My friend,” He said, “do you see the path that leads into the forest from that outcropping? Today, if you wish to receive a most special blessing, follow that path and you will come to the entrance of a cave. Using this candle, follow the path into the cave as far as you can. If you do this, I believe your heart’s greatest longing will be fulfilled.”

Bowing in deepest thankfulness, the wood-gatherer accepted the Holy Man’s candle and took his leave. He located the beginning of the path quite easily, and with a light heart, began to walk where it led.

After several miles and some rather difficult climbing, he came to an opening in the mountain which indeed was the entrance to a very dark cave. Holding the Holy Man’s candle before him, he entered. Though the intense darkness aroused feelings of fear, the light from his candle kept his mind focused upon his purpose: he wanted to find great wealth and deliver his family from the pain of poverty.

As the path descended deeper and deeper into the cave, the wood-gatherer began to notice large chunks of coal that had fallen from the walls. Knowing the great value of coal in the town marketplace, he filled his sack and began his retreat,

thanking the Holy Man with each breath for this wondrous treasure.

That night, having sold his coal for more money than his family usually earned in a week, they had a wonderful celebration and sang joyous songs of praise to He who had led them to this great treasure. And that evening, for the first time in recent memory, all slept untroubled by pangs of hunger.

The next morning, still in a holiday mood, the entire family slept late and spent the morning enjoying their new feelings of wealth. With no need to work that day, they cleaned their hut and did many of the nice little things for each other which had not been possible in their toil-filled days.

After a few days like this, the wood-gatherer arose early one morning and set off once more to find the cave the Holy Man had shown him. He missed the turns several times, but after much backtracking, he did manage to come to the entrance.

Using the candle the Holy Man had given him, he entered the cave and began the descent into its engulfing darkness. Once more he came upon the valuable chunks of coal, once more he filled his sack to overflowing, and once more he sold his treasure for enough money to support his family for a week.

So it went for many years. He still thought of himself as “The Wood-gatherer,” though no twigs had filled his sack for a very long time. But he had thought of himself in that way for so long that the old identity persisted. However, with the free time that this new wealth had brought them, he and his family were able to do many things that a mere wood-gatherer family might never dream of. And because they were basically kind and humble people, much of their time was spent in helping others, in providing free coal for those too

poor or weak to gather their own fuel, and in offering joyous songs of praise to the Holy Man whose great gift was clearly the source of their new lives.

One day, as the wood-gatherer was filling his sack with the bounty of the cave, it occurred to him that he had never explored any further than this area where the black gold lay freely upon the ground. He felt in no hurry that day, and a great longing came upon him to explore this wondrous cave more deeply. With the Holy Man’s candle firmly in his outstretched hand, he began to slowly walk forward. For several hours he viewed in awe chambers which sparkled with diamonds embedded in the rock. He passed deep pools of crystal water, and as he drank, he felt his entire being become filled with its exquisite clarity and liquid wisdom.

Still deeper he journeyed until finally he came upon a chamber more expansive and wondrous than any he had seen before. And there, in the very center, upon a golden stand, was a giant sphere of crystal which shone with the very Light of creation Itself. Bowing, he somehow knew to seat himself before this radiant globe and allow its heavenly Light to bathe him to his very core.

He hesitated. Every now and then he would look at the stub of a candle which remained from what the Holy Man had given him, and he wondered if it would last for the duration of another trip into the cave.

After what seemed to him like an eternity of indecision, he awoke one morning with a glad heart and a clear purpose. He would return, and all fears of the consequences of this decision he boldly banished from his mind. Ascending the mountain once more, he was almost giddy with anticipation. The images of the chamber with its radiant crystal sphere now danced in his mind constantly, fed by a new daring which he could only assume was still another marvelous gift from his beloved Holy Man friend.

At last he came to the entrance of the cave and traversed the miles of twisting corridors which led eventually to the remembered chamber. Yes! It had not been a dream – the dazzling crystal globe was before him once more, and without hesitation he took his place before it. He sat erect and with joyful respect offered all that he was to the Eternal Light which danced before him.

Once more he found his consciousness being drawn into the very center of this laughing Light; once more he found himself gazing in awestruck wonder at the magnificence of creation which emanated from this very point. And this time he found himself filled with an overwhelming longing to merge with this Source of all creation, this Eternal Light from which all other lights derived their existence and meaning.

In his ecstatic explorations of the universe, the wood-gatherer's gaze finally fell upon the place where his own body sat entranced. In his folded hands was a tiny stub of a candle, its wax almost completely consumed. He watched as the last molecules rose up the wick, as the last feeble rays of light sputtered from the dying flame. He was aware that if the

Perhaps we might call what followed meditation, but the wood-gatherer was much too ignorant to know of such fancy words. In the simplicity of his pure heart, though, he knew to worship, to surrender, and to receive the blessings which radiated from the center of the cave which the Holy Man had shown him.

In this surrendering, he found his consciousness drawn into the very center of the sphere. From this vantage point, he could look outward and follow each ray of Light to its ultimate destination. For hours he gazed in wonder as he saw the entire world unfolding before his glance. As soon as he had a thought of an object anywhere, he was able to see that its ultimate source began with the light which shone from this

wondrous crystal sphere. It was so obvious! Nothing was really as solid as it appeared – all was Light, was dancing images which had their source in this crystal sphere at the heart of the Holy Man’s cave.

After a time, the strain of such expanded awareness finally overcame the wood-gatherer. He sadly found his consciousness leaving the crystal sphere and returning to his now apparently-solid body. Overcome with exhaustion, he slept. After a time he awoke and was delighted to see that the Holy Man’s candle was still shining, though the length of the taper had diminished noticeably. Slowly he found his way out of the cave and returned to his family.

Days passed, and something was obviously very different. His wife and children noticed it, but when asked, the wood-gatherer became oddly silent and retreated to a grassy glen near the hut. Within, he felt haunted by what seemed a dream – he could barely dare to think it an actual memory! Yet he could not forget. And in remembering, all of his normal world seemed pale and without much meaning. He longed with all his heart to return to the magical chamber he thought he remembered, but there was a fear upon him, and flame should cease to burn, the wood-gatherer would never be able to leave the cave. He also knew that it didn’t matter, for that which had been living within the wood-gatherer was immortal, was One with the Source of all Light, of all creation, and was able to dance freely in any form, in any place, in any time.

Still, due to a certain fondness for that which he had been, his heart trembled slightly as he watched the last flicker of his old fear rise up the wick and be consumed in the moment the flame burned its last.

Where before had been sitting a humble wood-gatherer, there now appeared the radiant form of the Holy Man. His face aglow with a beauty never seen by mortal eyes,

He began to expand and draw the shinning crystal within him. As He grew, the entire cavern easily fit within His joyous heart. Still larger He became, now encompassing the entire cave, the mountain, the planet, and, finally, all of creation!

From within the shinning sphere in the Holy Man's heart, it was so very obvious that this magnificent Being and all creation were indeed one and the same. There was no separation anywhere, just infinite Joy, Truth, Freedom, Love, and Peace. There had never been anywhere to go, never been anything to accomplish, never been any need to fulfill. It had always been perfect, always would be perfect, and indeed, could not possibly be any other way.

With a radiant compassion which danced upon and within every molecule of creation, the Holy Man smiled.

In a humble hut near a grassy glen, a wood-gatherer returned with his sack of coal. A wife and children were fed and played happily with their father. Joyous laughter continued to fill this part of the forest. And life went on, bathed in the ever-present glow of the Eternal Light.

*Author requests to be anonymous*

## *Chapter Seventeen*

# *An Offering of Remembrance to Our Earth Mother*

*Edited from A Talk by  
Emmanuel Vaughan-Lee*

*Given at St. Ethelburga's Centre for Reconciliation and Peace in London in November 2023, this talk speaks to the possibility of profound inner transformation amid the great changes engulfing the Earth. Exploring the need to step away from a humancentric paradigm and towards a remembrance of the Earth as a divine being, Emmanuel asks: "As so much falls away, what can we offer to the Earth? How can we place Earth back at the center of the story? What opens when love once again becomes present between us?"*

This evening I want to speak about shifting landscapes, not the outer shifting landscapes that are engulfing our world, but the inner shifting landscapes that are engulfing our hearts and our beings and demanding our attention perhaps even more than what is unfolding around us.

For me, the real story that is unfolding beneath the surface is the cry to decenter ourselves from the narrative that has engulfed our world, because that story has gone awry. And to me, the real shifting landscape that must unfold is

within. It is an inner change where the human being is no longer the central character in a play that has gone on for far too long, because the human being never belonged at the center. Something else belongs at the center.

Our hubris that we are in control, our arrogance that it is our domain, has led to these monumental, mythic changes that are gripping our world, that are changing our climate, that are raising our seas. And we must remove ourselves from the center of that story so that we can begin to set it right. But if we decenter ourselves from the story, where do we turn? To whom do we turn? For me, there is only one answer.

We turn towards the great, divine being that is our Earth, that is our Mother, that is our kin, that is, in truth, ourselves. We are part of Her, although we have forgotten. We must turn towards Her who really *is* the center. And when we turn our head from here to there and embrace this great being, this great Earth, this great living world and all She holds within Her, we step away from being at the center of the story and step into a very different space. One might call it a liminal space—a space between the worlds. The human-centric paradigm has come to the end of its days, even though it is often hard to recognize that. We step into a space where one world is ending and another one beckons us to engage with it.

This new world is emerging from the ashes of the old one, even if it is very nascent and hard to see, even if it is invisible at times. And we step into this space as we let go of the human being at the center of the old story and turn towards this great, great being who is at the center of the True story.

There is a wonderful line by the poet Natalie Diaz that I like very much. She writes, “*We must go beyond beyond to a place where we have never been the center; where there is no center—beyond, toward what does not need us yet*

*makes us.*" For she does not need us; we can go and she will still be here. But she *wants* us, and there is a difference. She wants us to remember who She is—who She *really* is. She wants us to live our lives in remembrance of who She is—this great, great being.

But how do we orient ourselves in this liminal space between the worlds, in relationship to this great being that is our Earth, that is our Mother? It is not just good enough to turn from here to there—that is the first step. But how do we orient ourselves? How do we hold ourselves in relationship to Her?

And here I must turn to Her as the example and let Her be the mirror that we can mimic. Because everything that she does is an offering. Every second of every minute of every hour of every day, she offers Her abundance, Her life. Without Her we cannot breathe. Without Her we cannot eat. Without Her we can do nothing. Nothing happens without Her offering, and it exists constantly, this flowing of abundance from Her into this world. This offering does not play by our rules. And as much as we try to quell this offering and stop this offering with our hubris and our human-centered ways of being, she continues to offer and offer, because she is a constantly flourishing offering of life. And so I say we turn to Her as an example of how to be. And we ground our way of being in this liminal space as we look towards Her from a space of offering, just as she offers to us.

Any real offering—if it is done with authenticity and sincerity from the depths of our being—is not about us. It is about something else. It is about the *other*. An offering from the depths of our being with sincerity is always for the other. And so we offer ourselves, just as she offers herself. We root our being in offering with the hope that we do not slide back into our forgetfulness and our humancentric ways of being,

which are lurking around the corner always, trying to lure us back in, individually and collectively. We take that first step—we turn away, we look towards Her. We offer ourselves to Her just as she offers herself to us.

But still that is not enough. What do we offer? *What do we offer Her?* For me, we start with forgiveness. *Forgive me, great Mother. Forgive me for what I have done, for how forgetful I have been. Forgive me for my complicity in what I have done, for what I have allowed to unfold, for what I have watched being done to you.*

And we ask for forgiveness with humility: *I know not what I have done, but I know now, and I ask for your forgiveness.* And I don't just ask once or twice—I ask daily, because each day we forget. Each day we must remember what she is giving us. So we bow down with humility: *I am so, so, sorry for what I have done.* For me, that is the first step, the first *real* step of an offering towards Her.

Then I would offer my recognition of Her. And here it becomes a beautiful journey, because the ways that she offers herself to us, that demand our recognition, are so myriad they cannot be counted. There are too many ways to even comprehend, because she is present in everything—in every rising of the sun and rising of the moon and every passing cloud and every tree and every blade of grass, she is present. And she does not need us, but she wants us. And she wants us to recognize who she is in the smallest of ways—the greeting and acknowledgment through the senses—and the most profound and miraculous ways, where we are engulfed in a beauty that can never be described. We soak it in and we recognize it as an expression of Her, as an outpouring of Her.

This can become the central defining way we live our lives, if we allow it—to bring our recognition of this great being that is our Mother to the center of our lives. Not us at the center, but the recognition of Her at the center in all the

forms she takes. We wake up and we are given so many opportunities to remember Her, to recognize Her. Everywhere we turn, there She is. Her abundance—it's overwhelming!

Once one has turned away from being at the center and looked towards Her and said, *"I offer myself to You, just as You offer yourself to me,"* there is no excuse to not recognize Her in all the ways She makes herself known. Because each time we choose not to recognize, we forget and we are drawn back to being at the center of the story. If we are going to wake up to who She really is, then She demands our attention. She demands our focus, our perseverance, our commitment—and the more we recognize Her, the more our ability to be in a space of attentiveness to Her changes. It is as if the senses which only used to function in their physical form—our ability to see, our ability to hear, our ability to smell, to taste, to touch—they change as the outer senses make way for the inner senses. And then the eye of the heart and the ear of the heart—our body can feel Her body through the act of recognition. It changes our ability to be in a space of attentiveness. And it changes our ability to notice what is happening beyond the headlines, to actually perceive it with the full capacity that we have as human beings—with our physical eyes and our metaphysical eyes, our physical ears and the ears within. And then what we see and, more importantly, what we feel shifts and changes.

The news we hear is no longer just news but tremors we feel in our very being, ripping us apart just as it rips Her apart. Tremors in our very being, not headlines—and this will change us. When we feel what She feels, even if the capacity for us to absorb what She does is but a hair compared to Her experience, it will change us. It will break us open, as it should. It will leave a mark, as it should. And out of our beings there will flow grief, there will flow pain, desolation,

as there should. Because that is what She feels, and we should feel what She feels if we are going to truly leave behind this world where we have played the central character for far too long and embrace Her. *We have to feel what She feels.* We have to feel what we have done so that we can be changed, can be broken open and not go back to our old ways. Then we can truly bear witness in the deepest part of our being.

It is not good enough to bear witness with these eyes alone and these ears alone and to feel sadness and feel disdain. We must feel deeper and deeper until it begins to rip us apart so that we remember and we hold inside of us what has happened. Because that is part of what it means to ask for forgiveness, at least to me. *Forgive me. Forgive me for what I have done. Let me feel what You feel, so I will know, so I will not forget again.*

And it will hurt, but if we truly offer ourselves, then we can bear it. The human heart and the human body, when it is given in a space of offering, is much larger than we realize, has a greater capacity than we realize. It can hold so much, and this pain and this suffering and this grief, it awakens something so ancient inside of us if we let it, if we allow ourselves to feel it and let the vulnerability wash over us. Because when one feels that pain and one feels that cry of the Earth, one feels vulnerable, just like She is vulnerable in that moment.

That vulnerability is like a key which opens a deep ancient love that exists between us and our Mother, this great divine being that is our Earth. And while we may have felt that love before—the recognition, the beauty, and the joy that can come from Her offerings—when we feel Her pain, that love has a different quality, a deeper quality, a more potent quality.

It is that deeper love that She wants us to awaken inside of ourselves and return to that primordial love that

existed from the beginning, that love we forgot and covered over with ourselves and images of ourselves. That love is the most wondrous thing because it is real, and it taps into the most primal essential aspect of who we are as human beings. It connects us to Her through the conduit of relationship that exists beneath the physical, beneath the atoms that we all share.

When that love is awakened in us, then things really start to change within. Our landscapes within truly shift because we are sharing a different relationship with Her now than we ever have before. The blood that runs through our veins becomes the blood that runs through Her veins. A gushing river and the blood in our veins are the same at that point, because the love flows in the same way between them —the love that has been awakened inside of us.

And when that love is present in our lives, the way that we are able to be in relationship to Her, to recognize Her, to offer ourselves to Her, to be in a space of forgiveness towards Her, it changes, it deepens. We realize that before it was just skin deep, it barely cracked the surface, because now we are in a different way of being with Her. There is love present—a primal, ancient kind of love that makes human romantic love trivial by comparison. It is deep, it is ancient, it is felt in the core of your bones and the depths of your heart.

Once that love is there, it does not go easily. Then something truly shifts and every action we take will be imbued with that love. And then the difference between the sacred and the profane falls away, because every act will become a sacred act when it is imbued with that love. You walk down the street imbued with that love and that remembrance of Her and it flows through your being and your blood. Every act becomes a sacred act of remembrance —how could it not be when that love is inside of you at the

deepest level? And then your prayers change, your silence changes. What some perceive as inaction—which is not really inaction—changes because that love is present. There is a different quality of being that exists because we have *become* a different quality of being, because we are in relationship with the great being in a different way, in a deeper way, in a real way. And a space begins to emerge inside of us—a space that can hold us in a different way, that can hold the pain, that can hold the grief, that can hold the offering. What was ephemeral suddenly is no longer so. It is lasting. A space has emerged from the love and the grief and the recognition and the forgiveness that are all parts of the offerings that we make, in deference to Her.

And this space, it is like a vessel. It holds the sacred nature of creation inside of it. The remembrance of who She is and our relationship to Her. That space is like a church or a temple where she is recognized in the smallest and largest of ways. That space is a refuge at a time when we need refuge. If we are to keep the sacred nature of creation, this thread of remembrance, alive through a human way of being, then we will need spaces that allow us to do so. Otherwise, it will fall away just like so much else will fall away in the coming decades. We need spaces, like this is a space of refuge and this is a space of offering. But *we* can be a space of refuge and *we* can be a space of offering if we allow ourselves to be transformed, if we allow ourselves to turn away from a world where the human being is at the center, towards Her; allow this love to come alive in us through the grief that we feel. We can become a refuge and we can become a space. And then a thread can be woven between the world that is dying, the world that is coming undone, and the world that is to emerge in the future.

These spaces do not exist in isolation, just like she does not exist in isolation. These spaces, they recognize the

other spaces that exist within human beings, within communities. And when I say recognize, I mean recognize on a spiritual level, and then that individual thread becomes woven with the other individual threads and a great tapestry can be woven from these different spaces—spaces comprised of our love towards Her, offered towards Her.

These spaces, they serve many purposes. The purpose in the present is to keep this note of remembrance alive so that in this era of forgetfulness there will be—even if it's just a few of us, a few spaces—enough to keep that note singing. As Brecht says, "*There will be singing in the dark times.*" But that singing must come from within the space we hold in deference to Her, in honor of Her, in offering towards Her. And these spaces are also for the future, because if we only hold this space so that something can stay alive in the present, then we are being shortsighted.

The world that is coming into being is going to come into being slowly and not on our timeline. It's going to take a long time for this empire of late-day capitalism to die. Longer than any of us would like. And these spaces can hold something for this time of transition for the future. We must hold them for the future, just as they used to build the cathedral stones one generation after the other for the future; just as they used to think of each action taken with seven generations in mind for the future.

The way that we nurture these spaces is through the daily, simple recognition of who She is. If we don't do that, then the spaces will lose their potency and slip through our fingers. They will slip away unless we take the lessons we have learned and we apply them each and every day, as we turn towards Her and offer ourselves to Her over and over again. And then we offer that space, because it can never be about us. "*We must go beyond beyond to a place where we*

*have never been the center, where there is no center—beyond, toward what does not need us yet makes us.”*

*Emmanuel Vaughan-Lee is a filmmaker and a Sufi teacher.*

*His films include: Earthrise, Sanctuaries of Silence, The Atomic Tree, Counter Mapping, Marie’s Dictionary, and Elemental. He is the founder and executive editor of Emergence Magazine.*

*The full talk is available here: [emergencemagazine.org/interview/an-offering-of-remembrance](http://emergencemagazine.org/interview/an-offering-of-remembrance)*

## *Chapter Eighteen*

# ***Joshua Yeldham Surrenders to Nature***

*Nathan Scolaro on Joshua Yeldham:*

*It can be easy to get locked into a fixed way of seeing the world, to think we've got a handle on what it means to love, be creative or be kind. We tend to throw these words around like we've mastered them, assuming that everyone understands them the way we do—until you meet someone like Joshua Yeldham, who offers a perspective that is so completely foreign that your mind is opened and your sense of the world is altered forever. This conversation did that for me.*

*Joshua has been immersed in a place of deep curiosity and attention since early on in life, seeing the world through a mystical, almost spiritual lens. His physical journey has taken him from suburban Sydney to the Swiss alps, Venezuela to Rhode Island, and from the Australian desert to settle in the Hawkesbury River—an idyll of creeks, mangroves and rock faces north of Sydney where he now lives with his wife Jo and two children, Indigo and Jude. His inner journey has seen him emerge from a childhood being bullied for his dyslexia to a young adulthood of wild exploration, which fired his creative spirit and led him to make the Emmy award-*

*winning film Frailejón about his encounters with a hermit in the mountains of Venezuela.*

*Throughout his twenties, Joshua sought to build a bridge between himself and the landscapes he encountered. He found expansiveness in solitude, spending much of his time in the Australian outback, where he started to draw and paint his deepening connection to nature. So much of Joshua's work is created in the spirit of gratitude and devotion. When he was told he couldn't have children, he began creating an entire series of owls, believing they were responsible for his infertility. He and Jo then fell pregnant and the owls became important totems, attracting the interest of hundreds of buyers who hoped they would help them conceive.*

*Joshua is now one of Australia's most acclaimed and sought-after artists, with work spanning photography, painting and sculpture. Each of his creations is layered with highly intricate pattern-work and etchings, reflecting the layers of story and mythology that emerge when we pay attention to the natural environment. His sensitivity, his ability to tune into the subtleties of the world around him is deeply inspiring. I leave our chat feeling liberated at all the possibility that exists around us to grow in awareness and form richer connections with the land, ourselves and those we love.*

**Nathan Scolaro:** *I loved the book so much, the journal for your daughter Indi. It's bursting with love and joy and creativity—the paintings, the poetry, the photography, the way the story is told through them, it's really moving. And I guess I wanted to know how your creative spirit has evolved over the years, from before having children, because you have two now—your son Jude also, to after.*

***Joshua Yeldham:*** I think that as a creative person in the early days I had that privilege of being self-obsessed, where everything was about my creation. And when you're young, you're able to dedicate endless amounts of time to your own quest, to your art, to really discover your potential. And when I fell in love, deeply in love with Jo, we wanted to have children. Then I was told I couldn't have kids, that I wasn't fertile, and the ball really came tumbling to a halt. Suddenly fertility became the most important thing. And painting the creation became the vehicle for me to cope with being told I couldn't have kids.

That went on for a couple of months. Lots and lots of creation paintings. Then new hope emerged with another doctor that there was the potential I could have children. While that was going on, I started to make devotional art, and I started to do things with a sense of spiritual hope, or with spiritual aspiration to survive what was really that period.

When Indi was born my whole career changed because I had an opportunity to change the history books and be the first man in my lineage, the first father in my lineage, to actually work and live with my children closely and intimately. As far as I know all the men in my father's family have gone away to work and only have short, pure moments with their children. And I wanted to get on the ground with my kids, feel them, taste them, and be as much involved in their imaginings as they, I hope, are involved in mine.

So unlike a lot of artists that have isolated themselves from children, "Never come to my studio when I'm working, don't disrupt me" kind of attitude, I wanted them to be all in. For some artists, if someone disturbs them they feel they've lost that moment and they've lost that creativity. And at the start it was hard for me, but I had to realise that even if a toddler disturbs me in my studio, the creativity would keep coming back.

I wanted that kind of energetic relationship with creation. So that took a little while, and my children grew up on the floor of the studio. And I learned to deal with distraction. Often it felt like I was stealing moments to paint. And in stealing moments I had to upgrade my technology and become a much more accurate archer. I became more able to create anywhere, at any time. Still with frustration, but I had my children with me by my legs. As they grew up, they gained power by creating worlds that I had come into and they claimed for themselves. And then Indi, whose words are hugely powerful for me—she probably is in my top three people to give feedback on all my work—she started to be a commentator in this world.

*What kind of commentary did she give you?*

Well, I had a painting that was in the Wynne Prize a couple of years ago because of her. So I thought it was complete, and she came in and said: “Dad, Dad, you’ve slacked off on the sky.” And I said, “What are you saying?” She said, “I know you’re tired, so you’re just telling yourself it’s done. But it’s only one layer, you’ve got to carve it.” And the thought of me carving it was exhausting. There’s no way I could carve further that day. And she went to bed. And that night I just knew she had set me up. I went down and redrafted through the night. And when she woke up in the morning I said, “Better go and check.” And she took a look, came back out and said, “It’s finished.”

*[Laughs]. Oh gorgeous. What is the perspective that she brings, do you think? That children bring to art?*

Firstly, I think they’re observers. Indi is certainly an observer of me. For 12 years she’s just watched me, and I think she’s learned about charm. Because what Jo and I raised our kids to be interested in is that there’s charm going on

around us. And if we are subtle, we feel it. And then we see new vitality.

And from vitality comes evolution—credible evolution in ourselves. So Indi saw my painting, and she saw vitality in the tree. And she could detect that my vitality stopped at the skyline and I hadn't completed it.

*Very interesting.*

And I think that knowledge, that awareness of vitality informs everything in life, including how we find a life partner. So even though she wouldn't say those words, Indi's been able to see where charm is around her, she's able to see where the trickery is. And these are really great skills that I don't think are very often taught to our kids.

*No. And subtlety is something I'm discovering to be very powerful in life also. Being sensitive and listening to the moment. But I think many of us as adults are out of touch with that. How do you tune into the subtlety you're talking about?*

If we think about the owl, the owl is able to treat stillness as currency. So it trains to be still, which is what you have to do in nature, because in stillness you can read stories and patterns into the landscape. And you've got to see storylines so that you're more able to see your own storyline, really.

So subtlety is being aware that you are actually living in a story. From that awareness of story, and interpretation, we learn new skills, and we can start to go back a few pages and rewrite the stories if need be. And this is an ancient knowledge that has evolved, even back to the basic knowledge in India, over four, five thousand years ago: that ability to rewrite ourselves. Once we tune into the stories, and have an awareness of us in them, we can start to interpret the stories differently, or rewrite them.

*It's such an incredible notion, that we can rewrite ourselves by rewriting our stories. What is it about nature that lets us tune into the subtlety and the stories we are part of?*

I think the word “communing” is very beautiful, that we “commune.” And I think that we have higher intelligent conversations with ourselves in nature. Nature opens up our creativity and higher ground. If we look at the coconut, the outer husk is the roughest storyline of life, it’s the challenges and the ups and downs, the constant chattering that goes on in our minds, it’s the running out of petrol or paying insurance. Our real work is inside the coconut. In that milk of the coconut is our higher consciousness, our pure imaginings or writings or dancings. And for me the question is how do we release our awareness on the surface of the coconut and how do we absorb the succulent part that is milk inside the coconut.

I think this is what nature can do for us, it can make us succulent. It can make us flexible. And the great word that comes to me now is “sensual.” And so even you and I right now, we’ve already gone to the sensual in a matter of minutes by making those vows to each other. And just the feeling I get through the computer screen is that we’re ready to go anywhere without hurting each other. Sensual means that we will explore our higher ground in a safe way.

*That's really beautiful, and I agree with you that nature is a powerful space for us to tap into our consciousness, or this deeper part of ourselves. I know this to be true. But I think in modern life we are so removed from nature, we forget or are simply not aware of its potential. I think nature isn't a resource for a lot of people. And I just wonder how we make it more accessible I guess.*

So behind you is a shelf with very orderly books and objects. Now I can see the symmetry in the way that the shelf has been neatly stacked. Right? There's pleasure in the placing of the objects, with your books and vases, your tape deck which talks to a storyline in history, going up to a model of a building. So as you ordered that shelf, you're feeling something and making connections, through this arrangement of objects in time and space. And in that subtlety of your shelf is storyline. And when you read into that storyline, you can discover your "sensual-ness."

*I think you're picking up on something important here, that I make this distinction between nature and man-made when in fact everything is nature, right? This iPhone is nature, it's a product of man and so it's nature. The storylines are all around us.*

Well the iPhone is the optimistic side of our obsession with the phone. And by the time we're elderly we may have spent some 50-plus years in terms of hours on the phone. The optimistic side is it's very internal that you scroll through something like Instagram, you're not usually communing with others when you're doing so, you're having a reaction or experience. And I think eventually, for more and more people, they will see charm in things like meditation because the iPhone's teaching them to get lost in solitude within themselves.

Meditation is so powerful in that it bolsters our nerves; it rewires our nervous system, and it lets us bare witness to the storylines in our head. So my positive belief on all this is that eventually people become more accustomed to closing their eyes and hearing a higher voice in themselves—a higher consciousness. Because they've removed themselves from chatting so much to other people, all day every day, chatting,

chatting, chatting, on that outer coconut level. The phone is teaching them to go deeper.

When you're surfing the internet and you're going through Google and you hop on a subject matter and then you go from looking up, you know, car mufflers to suddenly visiting Costa Rica and a whole lot of whales in a matter of seconds, it's wonderful.

*[Laughs]. I'd never thought of that! How great. So you're an optimist, Josh? Would you describe yourself that way?*

You know I have a part of that. I also have the practical cautionary perspective that's weighing up stats about taking a risk. But as I get older and have the kids, I realise that a lot of people are making a lot of noise and we can really pare it back. Take a lot of the weight off our shoulders. A lot of our fears have no evidence behind them, and if there's no evidence that the worst-case scenario will occur, we can stop looking for it, and return to looking for something charming. Like we do on Instagram, we're always swiping for the most charming things. I think we can practice that in our lives—swipe away the unnecessary fears, the irrelevant, the redundant. They no longer exist in our evolution so we can quietly and politely ask them to move on and focus on the charm.

*I love this word “charm” you keep using. And in the book I really loved reading about this great sense of play and sweetness you bring to life, particularly to fatherhood. Did that come naturally to you as a father? Or were you conscious of that, of doing it differently to the way your father had, because I know he was quite removed from your life, due to how much he worked.*

I think it's a mix. You're right in that I was conscious to parent differently, my wife wouldn't let me do what my beautiful dad did—work, work. Before having children as I said, I just needed the studio to become the greatest painter ever. And then luckily two things happened: I realised A, I'm never going to be the greatest painter ever, because the reality doesn't exist—you'll be chasing tails the rest of your life if you play that game. The second part was that I fell in love with a girl who I was not willing to lose this time. With other relationships, they came and went. But this time it was a marriage. A unity. Unity is: I love you because in you, I love me. I love you and I want to marry you because I see myself in you and I love that. I love myself in you, and that, for me, is unity.

*But then is that speaking to the ego? Is that a narcissistic way to pursue love and relationship?*

I think it's speaking to consciousness, to this deeper part of ourselves. To the milk of the coconut. So basically I can fall in love with someone, and I can fall in love with them because they fill desires of mine, they patch up my negativity, they dissolve pain for me. But the love of evolution is the one where you actually love yourself through the other. And I think that sustains you through difficult times or challenges—because you're not being a chameleon to someone else. You're not shape-shifting. You can wake up in the morning and feel completely whole. In earlier relationships, less matures ones, we tend to give ourselves to someone else to the point where finally we are just exhausted, we have been trying different types of personalities. We're on the husk of the coconut. The love of evolution is where finally we've transcended, tasted the milk, the higher consciousness with your partner. And, you know, there, in the milk, anything is possible. Anything. Anything.

*How did you and Jo meet?*

So I was working as a filmmaker, this was in my twenties, and I had a good run and I got some money from the Queen. I was working on this movie out in the desert, and I came back to Sydney and met Jo at an exhibition. She was a photographer, and we had this incredible conversation. And at the end of the night, I said, “I don’t know you but please come out to the desert with me.” And she didn’t at first, but after about six weeks of me calling her from the sand dunes she finally came out.

*And what was it about her that so enthralled you?*

Well I think it’s partly what I said before: I was hearing myself when I spoke with her. I could hear the loving part of myself. I loved that I was loving. You start to hear it. And I told her what I was learning in the desert and I was honest with her. And she just allowed me to be me and evolve. And I think that’s the beginning of realising that this person could possibly evolve with you. When she came out to the desert she just took off into the dunes with her photography and we lived in this little Kombi van that was our home for a number of years. And I was making this film. Then the film got canned, I was so upset and exhausted by the process, and the truth of it was it wasn’t a great script. But Jo supported me so beautifully that I felt, in my sorrow, I needed to paint. So I bought reams of paper. And we were back in Sydney by this stage, but I decided to go back to the desert. Jo couldn’t come because she had to work. So I said, “I’ll go back and paint a picture for you every day.” But when I said, “I’ll paint for you,” it was “I’ll paint for me.” And I painted. And I discovered that I felt free to explore the desert in a sensual way that when those works arrived back in Sydney, and my sisters saw them in her new gallery with my mum, and said,

“Let’s put them on the wall,” it felt effortless. It felt like “wow, that’s charm.”

And I was also reading a philosopher called Gurdjieff at the time who was a very naughty, mischievous man in the 1800s. He was a charlatan and a rag-trader and an embezzler and he actually created a religious organisation that had all these followers, and still does, in New York and Paris. He had one amazing story that stayed with me where he went to a village on a horse and visited one of his colleagues who had the most rotten fish in the backyard. And this colleague apologised, he said: “I’m sorry, you can’t stay in this house, the fish is so rotten, no one will take them.” And Gurdjieff said, “Let me see them.” And he saw that the fish hadn’t been taken care of and were pickled in oil. He said, “I’ll take them. I’ll have them all.” His colleague couldn’t believe it. “Why would you take them all?” And Gurdjieff said, “I don’t know, but I feel charm in them, I feel connected to your stinky fish.” So he put them on the trailer, on his horse and cart. He crossed the mountain back into the middle of Eastern Europe, and he went through a new village and people came running out, running out. And they were Jews and they said, “Pickled herring! Pickled herring! How much for your pickled herring?” So for me, I felt I got a chance to have this exhibition, it was the pickled herring one, where the sorrow I felt about not making a movie in the desert was transformed into my first exhibition of paintings.

*So you hadn’t painted before then?*

No, I mean I was a child that lived in drawing. But I was so insecure, “I can’t do this.” I had never imagined that I would be able to make imagery as a form of currency. Wow. I love this idea of the pickled herring, that we can find beauty in the neglected and give it new life.

If we think about data, and we go back to the example of the iPhone, the web, we do a search and we have data. We have data flying around us, beside us. Even this conversation at the moment, just data, it's just information. It is then our wish to turn the data into knowledge. So what is the process that does this? Very few of us ask that question. I think if we learn that process, we become better at doing it. And one of the ways it occurs is that data turns into knowledge by consciousness activating the data. By action. Now if we don't use our consciousness, the knowledge turns back into data. Then the next level is okay, what is wisdom? From knowledge to wisdom, what is it? It's when higher consciousness says to the knowledge, "I wish to expedite my evolution. I wish to go faster to evolve. I wish to be stronger to evolve." And if you activate the knowledge it becomes wisdom. So, I'm not going to lunch with you because last time I had lunch with you, you ripped into me about how I'm being idle and lazy. And I've had enough lunches with you to realise, from the data of your chitter chatter, that I can't do anything in your eyes anymore. And yet, I wish to evolve further, so my wisdom says I should no longer invest my time with you, because I wished to be better, and your story of me is limiting me.

*Yes, right. It's really big thinking, this!*

Well, I can give you a package now of thoughts that are just rudimentary—or we can go firing into higher thought. And people can say, you know, Yeldham is too lofty or too spiritual, but this is just me turning up in a Porsche

.

*[Laughs]. I also want to talk about surrender, this strong message that comes through your book. It's the title of your book. It's a great word. I think it's a word that holds great capacity for us to heal and grow as human beings. But I*

*wonder why you chose that message first of all, for your daughter.*

Okay, so we know the word “surrender” as it is used during warfare, it’s always seen as bailing out. And so it had a negative connotation. We were raised never to “surrender.” My father would always say, “Give it your best shot. Do your best. Focus.” Surrender is coming from the organic world, the natural world. There’s a beautiful awareness in nature, and is best seen in the way trees communicate through a root system to each other. It’s been scientifically confirmed now that trees communicate through a fungus called “mycorrhizae.” It’s a fungus that’s on all trees, it grows around the roots of trees, and then acts like a massive net. It’s essentially the original internet of nature. It’s just a massive broadband connection where this fungus connects root system to root system. And a fungus is a conduit for communication, of nitrogen from one tree to another. And it allows trees to become aware that another tree is in need of nitrogen. The trees send nitrogen to each other, especially ones that are in need. Right? Mother trees, they’re the trees when you go to a forest you go, “Oh my God look at that tree, that is just bigger than everything.” The whole network of roots around it will be sapling smaller trees. And this plays an important role in pumping food to them so that they grow. Now in a way that’s surrender. In a way the mother tree is surrendering its own nitrogen, its own power source and giving it to the young to flourish.

When I was thinking about surrender, I was thinking about surrendering to life. We drop the expectations we have of life and let it take hold. Well, I think maybe what you’re saying is a metaphor for that, the trees letting their community life force sustain them. You give your charm and your talent and your love to others freely and beautifully, because in the end you only have your village or your forest. So it’s really a message of service to others.

*I think so. Absolutely. Well that really is the highest high.*

This book was made for love for my daughter, and it was made page by page by her creation and being in this world. But intuitively, to let her know that I love her. And that doesn't really mean it's going to be a best seller, it wasn't made like that. It was made for her. And then it attracted some attention. There's a rule in nature that if anything's vibrant and colourful people stop and look at it. Like bees, bees stop at a beautiful flower just loaded with pollen. You know about static charge and bees?

*No.*

So the law of nature is, be as colourful as you can, be as vibrant. And it's about creating the right vibrations to attract magnificence back to us. So the bees are flying at such speed that static charges their wings, and it's a positive charge. Like, scientists have worked out that they are fluttering their wings so hard that when they land on a flower to collect the pollen, they leave behind an aura of positive energy because flowers are naturally negative polarised. So there's a negative polarity, the bee lands and turns it into a positive polarity. So, why? Because when all the hundreds of bees are flying over that one flower that the bee before lands on, they sense the positive polarity and they don't even bother to land on it. The charge says the pollen has been taken. So they keep flying. Right?

*Wow! [Laughs].*

So if we're able to create a charge that is slightly negative, but not negative like we say, "Oh he's negative." But "negative" in that we're willing to embrace other people's positivity, such as the flower is willing to embrace that bee's

positivity, then they come. Magnificence comes to you. All this beauty and charm, even if you're doing a shit job and you're dealing with a shit boss, even if you accept the shit boss, you can't remain shit. You just can't. Nature will remove you out of it by way of someone coming to you with their positive charge. And this is such a beautiful exchange. And the thing about creative people is that they learn to bow when the other person is positive, and then they go quiet, and then the other person bows to the person that is positive, and it's a beautiful thing. It's what we call collaboration. The world evolves.

*So the book wasn't originally created for publication? It was picked up by this law of nature?*

Right, for a year it sat in a drawer. And then I was given a big survey show at Manly. And the curator at Manly Regional, Katherine Roberts, said to me, "Oh we're going to make a catalogue. Do you have any ideas?" And the minute she said that I felt like the light came out of my drawer, and I said, "Well I've written this journal thing, can I show you what I've got?" And she saw it, she said, "Wow! Do you think you could expand it?" And then we developed it very quickly for that show. And it went ballistic with people wanting it and acquiring it. I then went to the Byron Bay Writer's Festival as a guest. I was among all these great writers like Kate Grenville, and here I was, a guy who made a journal for his daughter. But the speeches I made went so well, we were in the top three of sales in the whole festival.

*And what's so interesting is that it was originally a gift for your daughter, but it turns out to be a gift for many of us.*

Oh, thank you. Well this project really is just coming from love. And it's coming from the milk in the coconut, from that deeper, richer part of ourselves. I'm highly dyslexic, you

know. I never thought I'd be a writer, never thought I'd be a painter. But I went through a lot of storylines in my life which had to do with ruling things out. I could barely put a sentence together that was spelled correctly, punctuated, but now I'm able to write in a way that is my style.

A lot of what make us is learning to trust, and learning to surrender to people's comments that aren't always constructive. Learning to surrender and really go to the source of what drives you. What drives you to be bright?

*I think there is something in that: how you had so much trouble with your writing because you were too much in your headspace. But you found it when you were in your heartspace.*

Yeah, I think that's true. I mean think about when we're stressed, when all animals are stressed. Sea creatures tighten when they're afraid they're going to be eaten. Everything tightens up. And once you relax, suddenly there is all of this possibility. If we're so stressed and so worn out, there is no space for the good ideas to come.

*How do we practice staying open? I mean, it's part of our condition that we will get anxious and close up a lot of the time. Do we have to make a conscious effort do you think to relax and make space?*

I think we all have these moments in our lives where we go, "Ooh, what I just did then isn't quite right. What I just said didn't really come from who I am. The way I behaved to that person or that animal or that tree, that's not sitting with me." Now we can either then forget that we had that experience and go back to the repetition of how we are. Or we can take that moment as probably one of the greatest leaps of our lives and go, "Okay, I'm just going to sit and listen to this. I'm going around to people and telling them I'm like

this. And yet I'm not. Why is that?" So we create a performance, but we must choose wisely what we wish to perform, because that storyline is our visage.

*Can I take you back a bit? I want to go back to that period of your life where you were told you were infertile, and then went on to have two children. I wonder if that experience felt "miraculous" to you, because I think it would for some people, to have that news, which is devastating for someone who really wants to be a parent, and then for it to change.*

"Miraculous" comes from "miracle" and I would have said "yes" when it was going on—that it was a miracle. But as I became more aware I realised that miracles are where we cannot place what happened. It's a mystery. We can't see the mechanics behind what's happened. As I grew in awareness, I learned completely the mechanics of what led to my child's creation. But I still see the marvellous aspects of the sequence. There was a sequence that occurred that I and my wife and scientists and doctors and nature and the owls all played a beautiful role in. The difference is, the miracle I can't use again.

There's a painting on my wall now. One part of my brain says it's childlike, it's worthless. And there's another part that says, "You've said that before about other pictures. You've said that before, and look at those pictures and how they evolved into what they are today."

So you can see the mechanics behind something coming to be. And I think it's very important in our process to rule out the express-level ego aspects that want greatness straight away. I wanted greatness straight away with becoming a father. I wanted to make love and have a child. But I had to break down and find another way to go up the mountain than just straight up, I had this crazy long journey with my wife, my wife carried most of the weight on this

expedition with IVF. And we had to go some unique amazing way that made me more powerfully a loving father than any other way.

*What's been the role of owls in this journey for you?  
Because they seem to be coming up a bit.*

Yeah, so Australians have grown up with many animals and there are these myths around them. We've grown up with black snakes and brown snakes, and we don't go out in the bush. If we do we have this whole theory that we could be taken out, and we have fear, fear associated with our landscape. If you go back over 150 years, trying to tame this landscape, we've done everything possible to chop the head off of every snake that ever went anywhere near us. Before we even tried to form any communion with these animals, we eradicated them. And that can be said about a lot of our nature: that we've eradicated things we've deemed potentially risky. In particular, our fear of fire. Bushfire. We've done everything we can to eradicate hundreds of bushfires, and yet it's needed for so many of these plants to populate.

So when I was out of fire, when I was told I couldn't have children, I needed a way to create fertility. I needed the fire. I knew that. I needed to taste the darkness of being told I couldn't conceive. And in the process of me going very dark in my work and very broody and turmoil-y, I had a run in with an owl up river. And that owl in my creative world, my dreaming, was stealing my embryos from me in my life.

*How do you mean?*

Because they have the ability to fly privately and take what they wish. Owls have two ears positioned differently so they get signals left, right, up and down. And the signals calibrate instantly, they then tilt their head and fly, and as they're flying for the kill, they close their eyes. They're

totally going off by sound. And they rotate their claws, and they're coming down with closed eyes and they go in for the steal. And I felt they were stealing my embryos, so I made pictures of them doing it. I used my creativity. And then the surrender happened. I went, "Ooh! I can't annihilate you owl, I can't kill you, I can't see you, you're invisible. You're a master of invisibility. So you're superior." I said, "I'll make you an offering. I'll pay homage to you. I'll only glorify your power. But please leave us alone." So I made drawing after drawing, painting and sculptures. And at the time I was aware of this philosophy of India, it says: "We must all live with the snake in the room. All of us have a snake to live with in the room."

And that's based on a time where they grew tired of living in country and there being snakes everywhere. They would come into their hut and a snake would be there. It was a daily or weekly occurrence that someone in the village would have to deal with a snake in the room, a very venomous snake. And they said, "You have to sit and live with it for that moment." And I'll tell you that when I was staying in the desert I had a moment where I'm waiting on the sand and a very long snake went over my body. Bah! And I couldn't move. And it went on and on over my chest. And I just lay still and it passed. I was on a highway, it was just an insignificant spot on its highway. That moment I understood I was part of the landscape, I could potentially live with a snake in the room. So getting back to the owl, finally Jo got pregnant. And I started giving my respect to that in my work. I started making them more celebratory. And I had 150 fertility owls, and people started buying them because they wanted to have children. So now I kiss the owl for teaching me new knowledge, for teaching me to fly above myself, to have an aerial perspective of my life.

*Amazing. What I've loved hearing about you talk and seeing in your work is how open you are to imbed story into the landscape, and your work is often described as having indigenous elements. But I think many of us as migrants are afraid to do that because we think it is not our right, that's it's appropriation. Indigenous people have that connection to the land, not us. But you are so ready and willing to do it in a way that's very meaningful for you.*

Yeah, so I have spent vast amounts of time in isolation in nature. I have embedded myself in the storylines as I was explaining earlier, as only one can do being in solitary confinement in landscape. And this is a rite of passage that's not everyone's cup of tea, but it was profoundly powerful for me and I have made connections in the desert, up river, that I carry with me always now. The other thing is that the tools I've decided to work with are carving tools. And they make lines or dots. And so therefore with lines or dots there is really only one dance that can be done, and that's the dance of vibration. So between two dots, there is energy. When I tap my tools just as an Aboriginal person gets paint and dabs it with a stick, the pattern is a space, a dot, a space, a dot. Or a space, a line, a space, a line. In that repetition we meditate. We travel. We leave ourselves. Because we're doing a mechanical repetition, and we're asking nature to guide us. This linework is seen in Aztec culture, Mayan, Indian, African, Aboriginal—you name it. What's powerful is the space between the dots. The silence between the vibrations. We could interpret it as the space between two stars or the space between two planets. So it's this idea that we're holding the universe together by that which we cannot see. And I can't speak completely for all the layers of Aboriginal paintings, but I can tell you from my experience, that space represents higher consciousness. This is the playful area where we can have a lot fun. These dynamics between you and I right now

that aren't visible, what are they? I think as we learn more, we become more aware of the space that exists between what we can see. And that space, I believe, is everything.

*Excerpted from a Dumbo Feather Magazine conversation with Nathan Scolaro; additional information about Nathan is on page 112. Read the full conversation at [dumbofeather.com/conversations/joshua-yeldham-surrenders-nature/](http://dumbofeather.com/conversations/joshua-yeldham-surrenders-nature/)*





### *Chapter Nineteen*

# *A Mom's Love Helps Daughter Wake From Coma After Five Years*

From Grand Rapids comes a story too magical to believe—of a mother's love creating a medical miracle, and a woman who cared for a comatose daughter in silence for half a decade.

Jennifer Flewelen was 35 when, she was put into a medically induced coma after crashing her car into a pole. Flewelen had just dropped her three boys off at school, but began to feel light-headed on the way home.

Placed on life-support at a large hospital, nurses were certain she would never recover, and though there are no hard or fast rules for when a person wakes up from a coma, by day two, physicians were encouraging Flewellen's mother, Peggy Means, to take her off life-support.

"I remember one respiratory nurse, she told me, 'Well, you know, she'll only get worse.' And I told her, 'don't you ever say that to me again, and never say it around my daughter,'" Means said. "It's very easy to be negative, but we have no room for negativity."

Weeks turned to months, which turned into years, but Means' love for her daughter kept her strong and faithful through the long hours of silence. Means did as much as was possible and then some—transferring her to different care centers, battling with insurance to keep covering the treatment, arguing with hospital administrators, all the while working full time as an industrial sewer, and pampering the unconscious Jennifer with all kinds of TLC.

Means would give her daughter "spa days" even though Flewellen was unresponsive to all stimuli. She would wheel her around the hospital talking to her as if she were awake; recounting the progress of her three sons in school. Visiting her nearly every day, this continued for five long years, through the pandemic and out the other side.

Then, one day, the truly unthinkable happened. Five years after the fateful crash, Means was sitting with her daughter in a sunny spot outside the hospital telling jokes, and Flewellen laughed. Means could hardly believe it.

"I started to wheel her up to the building," said Means, being scared at first, "and then I thought, she's laughing, so I stopped and got my phone out." After all that time, what Means believed all along with all her heart was true: her daughter was still in there.

"I would ask her questions about the boys and stuff, and she couldn't speak even a sound, but she could shake her head yes and no," Means recalled. "I said, 'Jen, am I your dad,' and she made a face like, 'no.' And then I'd ask about the boys, I'd mix up their names, like one middle name to another one." Flewellen was answering the questions correctly, so Means immediately organized speech therapy.

And that was the beginning of the end—Flewellen was indeed still there, and as the weeks went by, more and more of her was reemerging, like a butterfly breaking loose of its cocoon.

Just 2 to 3% of people left in a vegetative state for that long will ever wake up, but Means is ensuring her daughter will be able to do more than that. She organized occupational, speech, and physical therapy. She has organized surgeries to loosen the rigor mortis-like tension that had set into her joints so she can regain movement.

At *Mary Free Bed Rehabilitation Center* in Grand Rapids, Michigan, one doctor said that the case study is so rare that Means is basically driving scientific discovery. No one can say for certain how much faculty Flewellen will recover, because the instance is just too rare. But because the answer isn't known, Means is driving forward with all the love and determination that kept her going through the unresponsive years.

Eventually, Jennifer Flewellen, at age 41, and a new grandmother to a 1-year-old granddaughter, left *Mary Free Bed* and came home to stay with Means—herself newly retired. Flewellen's oldest son moved in with the two to help out.

The road to recovery is long—and no one knows where the end will be—but mother and daughter carry on

with a mantra given by a nurse practitioner who once told  
Means that ‘you have to dream it, then you have to believe it.’

*Story available here:  
[goodnewsnetwork.org/moms-love-helps-woman-wake-from-coma-after-5-years](http://goodnewsnetwork.org/moms-love-helps-woman-wake-from-coma-after-5-years)*

*Video available here:  
[youtube.com/watch?v=xzPU2Jqn7hU](https://youtube.com/watch?v=xzPU2Jqn7hU)*

*Chapter Twenty*

## ***Negotiating with Angels***

*by Dr. John Lerma*

*(Dr. Lerma is a hospice physician who deeply investigated accounts of his patients nearing death and experiencing angelic visitations)*

I had heard that Matthew was a very special 9-year-old boy, who had requested a transfer from home hospice to the inpatient unit so as not to cause further hardship on his family. I was curious to see what kind of child would do that.

Walking toward his room, I skimmed through the hundreds of medical and surgical reports as well as the invasive and aggressive treatments Matthew had received over the last two years. I was in awe of how anyone, let alone this young, vibrant boy, could still be alive.

I took a deep breath as I entered his room and immediately felt a wave of compassion as I took stock of the ravages of his illness. Immediately I sensed there was something else present that drew my attention more strongly, something not visible, but palpable. A feeling? Energy? Wisdom? Courage? It was something familiar, but I didn't quite recognize it. I stopped for a moment, trying to identify the feeling, but Matthew heard or felt me enter the room, so I shook it off and introduced myself to put the family at ease.

"I am Dr. Lerma. You must be Matthew," I said,

intentionally directing my salutation to Matthew's sister, who was sitting directly opposite from Matthew. When she started to laugh, Matthew protested loudly, "No, silly, I'm Matthew." Amazingly, he knew I had addressed her instead of him, considering he had been blind for more than a year.

He smiled a magical crooked smile and began an animated attempt to make me laugh. "Dr. Lerma, I want to introduce you to Regina, my tumor. The doctors call her retinoblastoma and tell me she is a bad tumor, but I consider her my friend. You see, Dr. Lerma, Regina is going to help my family and other children who are sick."

"How is that possible?" I asked.

"Well, God's the only One that knows that, but all I have to do is accept her." I told Matthew that I was so proud of him for wanting to help his family as well as so many people. I felt this was a coping mechanism, albeit one I had never experienced from a 9-year-old boy with an incurable and aggressive cancer to both his eyes. How could this fragile young boy, who was diagnosed only three years earlier, followed by the surgical removal of his eyes, with concomitant multiple rounds of chemotherapy and radiation, be so selfless and still without apparent worry? Was his spirituality the reason for his miraculous survival?

"Soooo," Matthew said, sounding reminiscent of Dr. Freud, "you're not one of those seeerious doctors, are you?" I assured him that I was not, and the child blurted out excitedly, "I knew it. You're the one I've been waiting for. The one they told me about!"

At that moment, I caught a movement in my peripheral vision and whirled around, thinking someone had entered the room, but oddly, no one was there. So I shook it off and asked Matthew what he meant by his last statement. He said a little cryptically and more quietly, "I'll tell you later. It's not time yet. It's a secret."

A tremendous amount of energy and joy radiated from this charismatic boy, and, as a doctor, I questioned whether he qualified for inpatient hospice care. It was apparent that Matthew was not as close to death as most patients who arrived at the inpatient facility, so I asked his mother why she felt he needed aggressive symptom management.

With tears in her eyes and a shaky voice, she said, “He asked to be brought here because he didn’t want to die at home. Dr. Lerma, I told him that God was going to heal him and was not ready for him, but no amount of persuading could change his mind. Matthew said his time was really close and that he did not want to burden his sisters and me with the difficult job of caring for him as he died.

“He is such a wonderful boy, always thinking of us, and watching out for us. Matthew said he would be the kind of man that would always protect us. I don’t know how he does it. I wouldn’t have the strength to stay alive like he does. Dr. Lerma, you know I don’t really believe in God, but I am starting to think that he was sent to my daughters and me from something greater than us all. Possibly God? Will you pray with me, Dr. Lerma?”

She was now crying inconsolably. Brushing a tear from my own eye, I put my arm around her and, softly but with fervor, prayed the only prayer I knew: the Lord’s Prayer. In a piecemeal fashion, she recited the prayer along with me, and at its end, she looked at me square in the eyes and said, “Don’t you feel it, Dr. Lerma? You know a presence of something wonderful and loving?”

“Without a doubt,” I replied. “Without a doubt.” I was truly inspired by what Matthew’s mother had sensed. Matthew’s courage and strength, and ability to find joy during adversity, were astounding. I remember the physicians and nurses at the cancer hospital talking about how he radiated love and joy. They said that, despite his painful therapies, his

constant smile, his beautiful, wise words, and his spontaneous heartfelt hugs always managed to make everyone feel loved. Medically, this fragile child, with a softball-sized tumor protruding from his right scalp, should have died months ago, slipped into unconsciousness, or have been in the throes of excruciating pain. Yet, he defied all the odds. Instead of an intolerant, resentful child, here was a joyful 9-year-old boy who had no problem holding clear conversation and an uncanny knack of making people feel happy.

After a few visits, I noticed that I was not the only one captivated by Matthew's pure joy and infectious laugh. Everyone who had the pleasure of meeting him called him mature, delightfully funny, loving, compassionate, and wise beyond his years. Word of his alluring and charming personality drew families from surrounding rooms, often leaving them feeling profoundly moved. Incredibly, this sanguine, youthful spirit willfully accepted the life God had given him. As Matthew put it so eloquently, "My illness will bring my mom to Jesus Christ, and that is worth it!"

After Matthew's regular doctor returned, I felt the need to continue my visits. It was as if I was magically pulled into the room every time I passed the door. One day I asked Matthew how he had lived so long with all that he had endured. He seemed to be deciding if it was time to share this information. He cocked his head as if listening to someone talk, and then he said simply and matter-of-factly, "Okay, I'll tell him. Well, doc, it was a gift from God's angels."

I was a little surprised by this revelation, but sometimes patients did mention angels, and I usually just ignored it as a side effect of the medications or the hallucinations of the dying mind. But this felt different somehow, as Matthew was very lucid and had refused all medications since his admission. Not wanting to jeopardize the relationship I had developed with Matthew by openly

doubting his comments, I eagerly pursued the conversation by asking him what he meant by “it’s a gift from God.” He replied, “It’s okay to tell you my secrets now. The angels just gave me permission to talk to you. I have lived this long because I asked my angels for extra time to allow my mother and sisters to accept my illness and death and especially to accept God.”

“Why do you think your family needs all this help?” I asked Matthew.

“Dr. Lerma, my mother became very angry with God after my dad left us. She had no job, and my father did not help with money. She was angry with God. Then when they found my cancer, she lost her belief in God. She wondered why God was taking everyone she loved and at a bad time in her life. She stopped going to church, and my sisters followed my mom. I am going to help my mother and sisters. God has allowed me to stay until they are healed.”

“Don’t you want to be healed, Matthew?”

“In the beginning, yes, but now I know that, if I’m healed, my mom will not find God, and that is not good. I want to always have my mommy. So I am going to die to help my mommy find God. This way, I will have her forever. Do you understand, Dr. Lerma?”

“Oh Matthew, of course I do. I don’t know what to say. I wish you could be healed and your mom find God too. Why can’t the angels and God make that happen?”

Matthew replied, “Dr. Lerma, if you could see the other side, you wouldn’t be asking me that question. You will see. It is all going to be perfect.”

I was completely mesmerized by Matthew’s astonishing revelations. How could his comments be construed as delirious? The clarity and clear understanding of his reasoning were beyond belief. I was now deeply captivated with Matthew’s logic, and thus continued my

conversations and delved further into researching the hallucinations of the dying.

Matthew continued, “The angels assured me that my family will find peace through Christ as a result of my faith and unconditional love for them.” I could not believe the wisdom that was being imparted by this 9-year-old. Matthew said he had always believed in God’s angels and had been conversing with them every Friday since he began chemotherapy. By this time, he knew that his illness had a purpose—a purpose to help his family and the world. I asked him how it would help the world, and he said, “Oh, you’ll see how it works. The angels have plans for you, too, but that’s still a secret.” I couldn’t drag any more information out of him, no matter how often I asked. I never knew a child who could keep a secret so well, but this was no ordinary child. The angels had chosen a worthy messenger.

What kind of child has the presence of mind to think so clearly about death, and to be so concerned for others when he is experiencing such trauma? And why did he request admission to our acute care center? What made him think he was about to die? How could he not be in excruciating pain with such a rapidly progressive, intra-cranial malignancy? These were questions that plagued me, and finally I decided to ask Mathew.

That same evening, when I got around to asking Matthew why he had requested admission for inpatient care, he confided, “I know my time is close, and I don’t want to die at home. It would make my family too sad.”

“How do you know this?” I asked.

As he glanced toward his mother, Matthew smiled and stated, “My angels told me.” This was the first time he had mentioned the angels in his mother’s presence, and she looked completely shocked as she said, “You never told me that. Why didn’t you tell me you were seeing angels?”

Again, as though it was as natural as rain, Matthew replied, “I wasn’t supposed to tell you until now, but now it’s okay to talk about them.”

I pretended to whine as though I were a curious child, “So what can you tell me about the angels?”

Matthew grinned mischievously, and said, “Now that you ask, I can tell you a lot, but Dr. Lerma, first read me a short story, then I’ll tell you more.” He handed me a small children’s book and told me to open it to page 24. As I searched for the page, I saw the simplicity of the stories and suddenly felt silly reading it to Matthew, as it was difficult to view him as a child. Yet, I felt it prudent to oblige him, and I cheerfully read the story aloud. It was obvious by now that Matthew had a knack for getting what he wanted; people just seemed to want to comply.

The five-minute story he requested was about a little girl who kept a wonderful secret given to her by a fairy. The fairy told her that she could reveal the secret at a special time, and only at that special time. The importance of the story was veiled, but clearly evident. Matthew’s mother and I both knew that his special time meant that death approached surely and steadily.

After the story, Matthew said the angels asked him to reveal the angelic messages, and that it was important to do it now. Mathew said, “I’ll answer as many questions about the angels as they will allow.” As a scientist, I set aside my clinical mind and opened my heart to this frail little angel messenger. My curiosity was piqued, and I eagerly began asking Matthew questions about life and God. He was clearly excited to be sharing his knowledge with regards to his disease and angelic experiences. Matthew told me, “Finally, I get to talk about all the cool stuff. Boy, it was hard not to tell anyone what I was seeing. Why don’t we talk tomorrow? I am sort of sleepy right now.”

“Absolutely,” I replied. “Any time you want to talk with me, just have the nurses page me. I don’t care what time it is. I am here for you, Matthew. Remember: I love you.”

He smiled, gave me a warm hug and a kiss on my cheek and said, “Sleep with the angels, Dr. Lerma. I love you, too.”

Matthew had me paged the following morning. He wanted me to talk and play with him. Surprisingly, I had an unusually low number of admissions that day, so I was able to spend all morning with him. Oddly, the next day was even slower, and in fact the entire week had been among the slowest in years. Was this just coincidence? Whatever it was, the extra time could not have come at a better time. As I entered his room, Matthew, without any pain or distress, asked me if I wanted to assemble Lego structures.

“Boy, that sounds cool. I always wanted a Lego set when I was young,” I told him.

“Well, here’s one. Let’s go at it,” Matthew commented. While playing, Matthew looked at me, as though he could see me, and said, “Okay, let’s talk about the angels. Ask me some questions. I can feel your heart, and it has questions, so shoot.”

I started the conversation. “Are there any angels with us today, Matthew?”

“Oh yes, they are here.”

I looked around, but couldn’t see anything, so I just kept talking. “How many angels do you see?”

“Three.”

“What color are they?”

“They are bright gold.”

“How tall are they?”

“They are a little taller than my favorite basketball player, David Robinson.”

“Do they come to you when you are sleeping or when you are awake?”

“Both ways. They come in my dreams, and we all go swimming with the dolphins, seals, and penguins. It’s a lot of fun. When I’m awake, they teach me things about the earth and people.”

“Can you tell me what they teach you about the earth and people?”

“Yes. They tell me that the earth is sick like I am, and that the people have to learn to make it feel better so that everybody can be healthy and happy. Sometimes when I’m swimming with the dolphins and playing with Gabby, I can hear the earth crying because it is sick and is sad. It makes all of us sad. But Gabby has shown me what makes the earth laugh.”

“And what makes the earth laugh, Matthew?”

“You make it laugh by swimming with the dolphins, seals, penguins, fish, and a bunch of other animals, and saying thank you to God for the water, plants, and all that stuff. Do you get it, Dr. Lerma?”

“Boy, do I get it. Thank you, Matthew, for teaching me what I have forgotten with regard to respecting our planet and the animals God created for enjoyment and survival. By the way, Matthew, do your angels have names?”

“Yes. The biggest one is Gabby, then Noe, and Raphy. They love us so much, Dr. Lerma.”

I thought those were very strange names for angels, but then again, could those be nicknames for Gabriel, Noel, and Raphael? Was it possible that two of Matthew’s angels were the Archangels the Bible spoke of? At that moment, a beautiful, young lady entered the room, and Matthew, looking elated, shouted out, “Hi, Mrs. Smith!” She and I looked at each other in total amazement, and silently wondered about his extrasensory perception. I immediately thought about

what an opportune time it was to find out more about Matthew's social, emotional, and spiritual persona. Once again, without any prompting from my behalf, Matthew asked his teacher to recount a story that happened a few months earlier. It was this brief story that gave me a precise picture of who Matthew had always been. Mrs. Smith recounted:

Matthew begged to go to school for show-and-tell day, and, although he was not in great shape to do it, the school wanted to help make him feel good in any way they could. All the kids showed up with that special something that would distinguish them from each other. Bubbly Susan brought her goldfish, little Jeff his fire truck, and Xavier even brought his loving mommy. In the end, it appeared that toys, animals, and even parents were the exhibits of choice.

That was the case until Matthew was wheeled to the front of the classroom. Matthew said he wanted to show his tumor and talk about the golden ones. I was a little disconcerted because of Matthew's illness and was very protective of him, but he insisted that it was something he had to do. He said that he wanted to help the kids understand that, just because somebody looks different or is sick, that they shouldn't be afraid or shut them out. He said they're just kids.

I couldn't say no to him. To my surprise, he quickly had the kids laughing and asking question about being sick, and if the tumor hurt, and what it was like to be in the hospital. He mesmerized the whole room with his straightforward answers, punctuated by laughter and silly stories about the people at the hospital.

Then he told them that when he feels really bad that he goes to dreamland to a beautiful ocean and swims with the dolphins, holding on to their fins and riding on their backs while they jump out of the water. He told them if they ever get sick not to be afraid because God would send special angels to help them.

He continued and said that angels are always with you and wanting to help; all you have to do is believe and ask. It was a defining moment for everyone in the room. Ever since then, I have to visit whenever I can. The amount of love and peace I get during my visits is awe inspiring.

The teacher wiped her eyes as she reminisced, and I realized even more strongly that this was no ordinary boy. His love and concern for others allowed him to be of such great service to so many people. Before Mrs. Smith left, I asked her, as well as Matthew's mother, if they knew any children or people in Matthew's life with the names of his angels: Gabby, Noe and Raphy, as I still held a place of skepticism. Neither of them could remember any of his friends, schoolmates, pediatric patients, nurses, or doctors with those names. They were as perplexed as I was. Matthew was not exhibiting classic delirium or cognitive impairment as a side effect of either his cancer or medications.

Were these visions and figures purely a coping mechanism? If so, how could this young boy, without eyes, accurately distinguish people's names and the color of their clothes? Did he have some sort of extrasensory perception, or was he truly obtaining information from unseen entities? I was having a difficult time reconciling what I was seeing with what I knew as a scientist. Either way, I was committed to continue helping Matthew find peace and comfort.

A day or two later, our conversation continued.

“How often do you see the angels, Matthew?”

He replied, “Every few days. Mostly or Fridays, I think.”

“Why do you think they come on Fridays?”

“Because that’s when I had my chemotherapy, and they want to help me feel better.”

“Do they talk to you?”

“Sometimes. They ask me if I’m feeling okay.” I tell them the truth—that sometimes I feel sick. They tell me they’ll make me feel better whenever I feel bad. That’s why I don’t have any pain like you always think I should have.”

“How do they make you feel better?”

“They show me blue water with dolphins and let me ride on them, and after that I feel better than before.” Matthew was confirming what he had told his classmates at show-and-tell, and now he was attributing it to the angels. It sounded wonderful, and I acknowledged that I would love to do that, too. He told me I could if I really wanted to. All I had to do is just believe and ask. I told him I really wanted to believe the way he did. He smiled and we continued.

“How does it feel to ride the dolphins?”

“I am soooo happy and laughing, and the dolphins talk to me, and the water and the sunshine all talk to each other. The angels tell me this is because they all have the one spirit of God.”

“Wow. I’d like to hear them all talking to each other.”

“Oh, you can if you really want to, and you will!”

“What else happens when you’re there?”

“All my friends are there, too.”

“Which friends?”

“The little kids that were sick with me at the hospital.”

“Have they already died?”

“Most have, but some are just visiting during their treatment.”

“What do the kids tell you?”

“They they’re so proud of me and they’ll come back for me really soon.”

“How soon?”

“Really soon.”

“Are there children in the room with us?”

“No, they only come on Friday.”

“Do you ever wish you could get better?”

“Yes, sometimes.”

“Can’t the angels make you well?”

“They could, but they showed me the things that made me choose to be sick. They said they’d make me well if I wanted, but I’m trying to help my family, and that’s more important. When people volunteer to suffer for others, it changes the lives of the people you suffer for. Even from my bed I’m able to help so many people.”

“I know. I can see that you’re helping me right now.”

Matthew felt how moved I was by this. He put his hand on my arm and said, “Don’t be sad. If you could see what I see—and you will one day—you’d be really happy for me.” There it was again: that cryptic language. I cleared my throat, pulled myself together, took a deep breath, and continued, “What things should I tell my patients who are dying?”

Matthew replied, “Tell them to say ‘I’m sorry’ for hurting others and also to say ‘I’m sorry’ to God. God wants us to believe in His Son who died for our sins. He wants us to be good and when we do wrong to try to do better and to always remember He loves us so much and wants us to love ourselves like He loves us. If we love ourselves, then we can love others and the world can be happy. The angels told me that this is not far way.”

That was powerful advice. I thought about how I could use it in my own life, and what a difference it would make if I just did that one little thing. All I could think of was the simplicity of his message, and how often we fail at giving others and ourselves a break. Yes, this little boy was teaching me things I never learned in medical school.

On Friday, at around four in the afternoon, I stopped in to see if Matthew had any new messages from the angels. I was fascinated by our conversations, and, even though I had a busy schedule, I still felt compelled to make time to talk to

this little sage in a broken body. Matthew smiled when I entered the room. I could not help but be captivated with the fact that this sightless young boy always knew who I was, as well as most people who entered his room. I gave him a hug, and we continued our angel dialogue.

“Do you mind if I ask you more questions about the angels, Matthew?”

“No.”

“Do you know today is Friday?”

“Yep. The angels were here in the morning. They woke me from my sleep.”

“What did they say?”

“They asked me how I was feeling.”

“What did you tell them?”

“I said I’m feeling sleepy and very happy.”

“Why are you so happy?”

“Because I was swimming with Jesus, the angels, the dolphins, and my friends. Jesus came and played with all of us today and told those of us who were sick that we were no longer going to hurt or be sad. He was going to have his angels pick us up from our hospital beds and take us to play with the dolphins, my friends, and anything we desired forever.”

“Is this the first time that Jesus has played with you and your friends?”

“You’re so silly. Of course not. Don’t you see that HE was the dolphins, the water, the sky, and everything else? HE is what was making me laugh and giving me the choice to help myself, my family, and others.”

Feeling completely emotionally disarmed, I continued the heartfelt conversation. “So Matthew, what else did Jesus and the angels say?”

“Well, Jesus said that my time here with my mom and

sisters is going to end, and that my wish is going to come true. Raphy then said that my mom and sisters will be happy for where I'm going, and that Jesus, our God, and all of us angels are going to take care of them forever."

"So, do you really think your cancer was to help your family and other people?"

"Yes. It feels so right."

"So, will I know the angels' secrets someday?"

"Yes, they said they'd come to you when you're like me."

"Will I be sick with cancer?"

"No, just sick, and they said I could come back to be with you, too."

At that moment, tears rolled down my face, and I hugged this special child of God, because I finally knew that the things he was saying were true. I told him, "Thank you for being such an honest, kind, wonderful patient and friend." Matthew did not know that I was dealing with my own health challenges, but apparently the angels did. This convinced me that the information Matthew was providing was true. Matthew hugged me back and whispered in my ear, "The angels are going to pick me up on Monday. Will I get to see you before then?"

"Of course," I assured him. "I wouldn't miss it for the world, Matthew. I want to put this in a book and let people know about your story. Do you mind?"

"No, the angels told me to talk to you so you could do that."

"What else do they want you to tell me?"

"To tell people that angels are real and they really care about us and want to help us. They want us not to be scared and to pray to God always for help like I did."

"What do you want to tell the world?"

“Not to be scared of dying when you believe in God. It’s actually pretty fun, with lots of people, dolphins, and angels that make you laugh. I told the dolphins it must be fun to be dolphins, and they said it must be fun to be a young kid, too. Isn’t that funny? We all want to be something else.”

I made my visit to Matthew early Monday around seven in the morning, because that is when Matthew said the angels would visit. When I entered, I heard Matthew laughing with his sisters while playing the karaoke machine. Matthew knew the moment I arrived and said, “Hello again,” as if he could see. As they were singing, I joined in for a moment and then said, in my best DJ voice, “Goooood morning, everyone. How is Matthew feeling today?”

“Great! I slept great, and I don’t even have any pain.” I started to ask if the angels were in the room, but before I could get the words out, Matthew boldly spoke up. “Dr. Lerma, do you know there are about 20 angels in the room with us right now?”

“Really? Anyone else?” I asked.

“Yep, all my friends from the beach. It’s like a big party with hats and balloons and everything. They’re all laughing, and the angels are so bright and gold that the light makes everyone in the room look gold, too. All this light makes me feel like when I was in the first grade when I could run and play all day in the sunshine.” Matthew’s words filled his mother and sisters with an incredible joy and sadness. His mother prayed aloud into the karaoke machine, saying, “God, I’m ready to give him back to you now. I don’t want him to suffer anymore. I love you, Jesus. I want to thank you for letting us feel the love from my son for as long as we did. But please, don’t make him suffer for us anymore.”

After her prayer, Matthew, with a look of exhilaration, turned towards me and said, “It’s done.”

“What’s done?” I asked.

“My wish is granted. My family opened their hearts to Jesus.” Matthew then gifted me with his final words: “I’ll see you later.” The little boy nodded his head as if he was sharing a special secret that only I would understand. I knew he meant that he would be by my side upon my death.

It was about four in the afternoon when Matthew went to sleep and slipped into a coma. Matthew passed away peacefully at six in the evening with his family at his bedside. I was sure his friends and angels took him home. Matthew’s mother and sisters sat there for a long time just looking at his peaceful face with the crooked smile still on it. I could feel his spirit still around, no longer in the worn-out body. I could see that Matthew’s mother was finally at peace with her son leaving.

I knew that this world was a better place for Matthew having been here, even if only for a few years. Everything had happened exactly as he said it would. As I left the room for the last time, I could swear I heard the sound of dolphin laughter and children giggling in the distance while water splashed in the background. But of course, as a doctor, I wouldn’t say that’s true. I can only honor the memory of what a little boy said about the angels on his way out. Interestingly, in my dreams I now swim with the dolphins regularly, and occasionally see Matthew there, more radiant than ever.

*Lightly edited from Dr. John Lerma’s book,  
Into the Light: Real Life Stories About Angelic Visits,  
Visions of the Afterlife, and Other Pre-Death Experiences*

*In the book there are “Doctor’s Notes” afterward  
containing additional inspiring conversations with Matthew.*

*Full book freely available online at pdfdrive.com,  
z-lib.io, pdfroom.com, and other sites*

## *Epilogue*

One morning I awoke with the title of this book going through my mind and a very strong urge to get up and write it down. A few hours later I again felt moved to sit down and write the introduction; I was amazed how it flowed perfectly, almost as if I were taking dictation.

I had no idea what would come of this, but over the next two months, I was given all kinds of insights as to what might be included in such a book. Over the years I had discovered many wonderful internet sites that provide beautiful, uplifting stories and articles. So as I read ones that particularly moved me, I decided to copy them into what would become this book. It was amazing how the contents just seemed to present themselves and then arrange themselves into what you have just read.

I claim no credit for this book, other than a yearning to be an instrument of Divine Love. If this book has been supportive and uplifting for you, then that yearning has been fulfilled.

*editor*

## ***Volume Two?***

If this book has been uplifting and spiritually important to you, would you like there to be a second volume? If so, do you have suggestions for it? Might you share this book with someone whose story you would like to see in the next volume? And might you be willing to contribute *your own story* of how Divine Love has broken through your ego barriers and made you Its instrument of Love?

Feel free to communicate with the editor at [aninstrumentofyourlove@gmail.com](mailto:aninstrumentofyourlove@gmail.com) to share your suggestions and thoughts. The editor may also be available to help story-sharers online and if need-be, record the conversation, transcribe and edit it into a proposed “chapter,” and work with them until it is “just right.”

If this book is important to you, please share it with friends and on social media. This is a volunteer project; everyone involved contributes what they can freely.

*May we all be willing instruments  
of Divine Love.*

## *Appendix*

# *Additional Sources of Uplifting Offerings*

*(Current as of early 2024)*

**Ashoka:** ([ashoka.org/en-us](http://ashoka.org/en-us)) builds and cultivates a community of Fellows, Young Changemakers, Changemaker Institutions, and beyond who see that the world now requires everyone to be a *changemaker*—a person that sees themselves as capable of creating large-scale, positive change. Together, amidst the exponential growth of a new inequality in change-making at a worldwide scale, Ashoka mobilizes and accelerates a movement to build an “Everyone a Changemaker” world where *all* people have the right and ability to co-lead solutions that transform their societies for the better.

**Awakin Readings:** ([Awakin.org](http://Awakin.org)) Every week they post a short reading from various wisdom traditions that points to the sacred. Each excerpt is also accompanied by an audio recording, an illustration and translations. Over a thousand Awakin Readings are available on their website.

**Charles Eisenstein:** ([charleseisenstein.org/essays](http://charleseisenstein.org/essays) and [charleseisenstein.substack.com](http://charleseisenstein.substack.com)) When the answer to his lifelong question, *What is the origin of the wrongness in the world?* crystallized inside him, the answer was bigger than the question. It dissolved its premises and began reordering his world. And ever since, he has been sharing in various his insights which include so

much love and respect for the natural world and vision for how we humans can evolve in peaceful relationship with each other and the larger life we are part of.

**Daily Good: News that Inspires:** ([dailygood.org](http://dailygood.org)) Daily Good leverages the internet to promote positive and uplifting news around the world to more than 100,000 readers with daily and weekly newsletters and their free website. Readers receive a news story, an inspiring quote, and a suggested action that each person can take to make a difference in their own lives and the world around them.

**Dumbo Feather:** ([Dumbofeather.org](http://Dumbofeather.org)) Dumbo Feather shared stories of extraordinary people to enrich our lives and those around us for twenty years until 2023, and most of these are still available to read online. It is part of the *Small Giants Academy*: A center for wisdom and action in Melbourne, AU. Back issues are available at [Smallgiants.com.au](http://Smallgiants.com.au)

**Good News Network** ([goodnewsnetwork.org](http://goodnewsnetwork.org)) Since 1997, millions of people have turned to the Good News Network as an antidote to the barrage of negativity experienced in the mainstream media. The website, with its archive of 21,000 positive news stories from around the globe, confirms what people already know —that good news itself is not in short supply.

### **Kosmos, Journal for Global Transformation:**

([kosmosjournal.org](http://kosmosjournal.org)) *Kosmosis* an ancient Greek term meaning the harmony and beauty of the universe wherein all parts have their place within the Whole. The *Kosmos* mission is to inform, inspire and engage individual and collective participation for global transformation in harmony with all Life. We do this by sharing transformational thinking and policy initiatives, aesthetic beauty and wisdom, local to global.

### **Llewellyn Vaughn-Lee:**

([goldensufi.org](http://goldensufi.org) and [workingwithoneness.org](http://workingwithoneness.org)) Through both *The Golden Sufi Center* and *Working with Oneness* Llewellyn Vaughn-Lee offers the wayfarer guidance through spiritual practice and

following the principles of the path back to the divine oneness that is experienced within the heart. Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee writes beautifully of not only his Sufi tradition, but his heart's insights for uplifting the consciousness of humanity.

**Our Better World** ([ourbetterworld.org/](http://ourbetterworld.org/)) is the digital storytelling initiative of the *Singapore International Foundation*, which brings world communities together to do good. They realize that all over Asia, people are doing good within their communities, unnoticed by most, and that there are people who want to do good, but do not know where to begin. So they offer *Our Better World* with faith that these stories inspire people to take action.

**Reasons to be Cheerful:** ([reasonstobecherful.world](http://reasonstobecherful.world)) A search engine for solutions, with new material constantly being added.

**Service Space:** ([servicespace.org](http://servicespace.org)) “*Change Yourself, Change the World*—We believe in the inherent generosity of others and aim to ignite that spirit of service. Through our small, collective acts, we hope to transform ourselves and the world.” See their site for all their offerings.

**Truth Consciousness:** ([truthconsciousness.org](http://truthconsciousness.org)) shares the wisdom of Swami Amar Jyoti with recorded satsangs (for purchase or free streaming 24/7 from their website), monthly excerpts from His uplifting talks, back issues of *Light of Consciousness* magazine (with many articles similar to ones in this book), and satsang transcriptions available to read and download online.





If I have learned anything after half a century of spiritual practice, it is the power of love. Love comes in so many forms and expressions. There are the simple acts of loving kindness towards friends and family, members of our community, or strangers. Love reaches across boundaries, expressing what is most essential and human: what unites rather than divides. “Small things with great love,” are more potent and powerful than we realize, because they reconnect us with the spiritual roots of life and its transformative and healing energies. Because life is an expression of love, each act of love is a participation and gift to the whole.

*Llewellyn Vaughn-Lee, from his article,  
Unity and the Power of Love first published by  
Kosmos Journal, September 2018,  
and available on our working with oneness website:  
[workingwithoneness.org/articles/unity-power-of-love](http://workingwithoneness.org/articles/unity-power-of-love)*